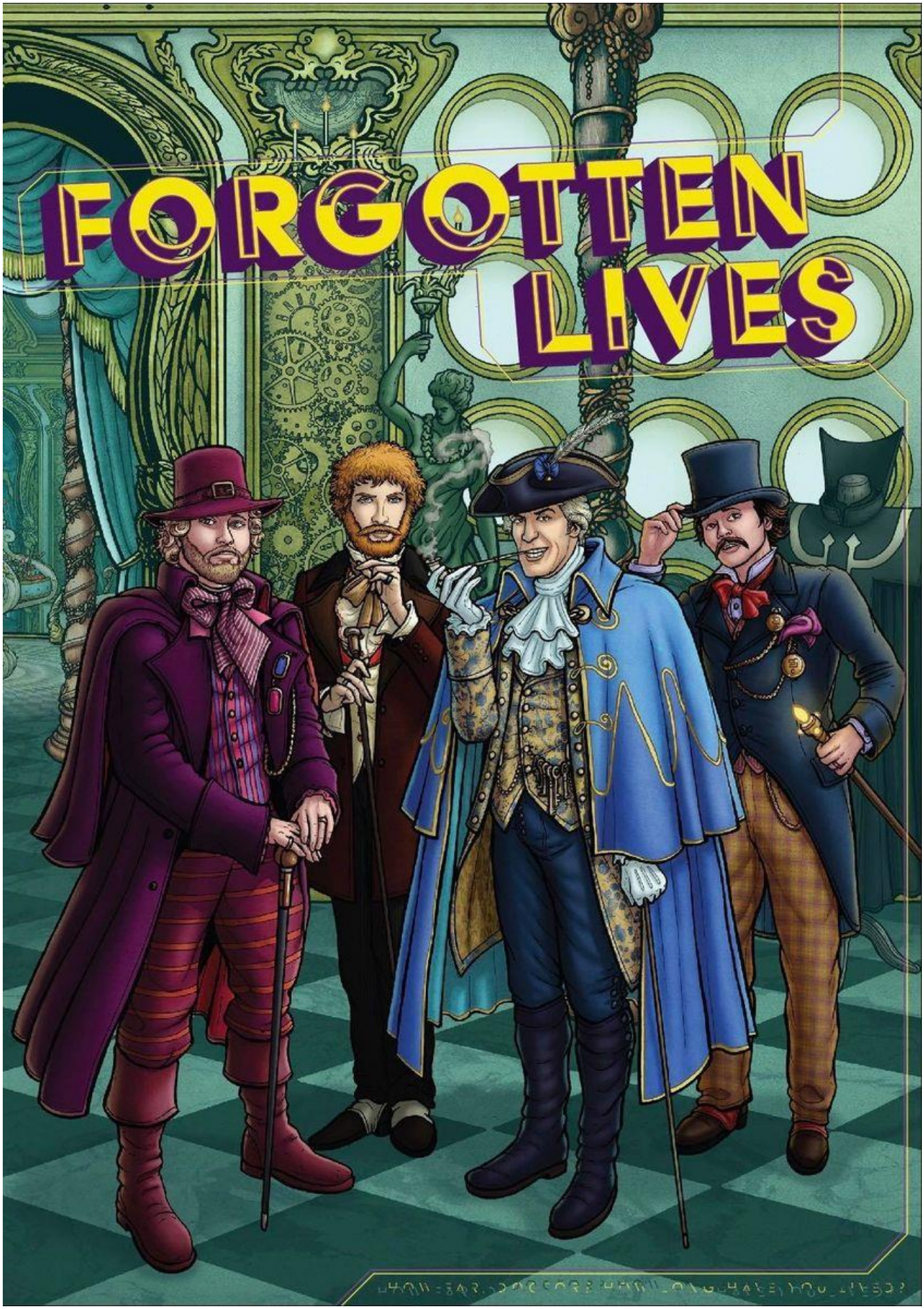
FORGOTTEN
LIVES

FORGOTTEN LIVES

AN ANTHOLOGY IN AID OF ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH UK

Edited by Philip Purser-Hallard
Stories by Simon Bucher-Jones, Philip Purser-Hallard, Andrew Hickey, Kara Dennison, Lance Parkin, Aditya Bidikar, Jay Eales and Paul Driscoll

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FORGOTTEN LIVES

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CONTENTS

Preface

About the Charity

The Knocking in the Mineshaft
by Simon Bucher Jones

House of Images
by Philip Purser-Hallard

The Cross of Venus
by Andrew Hickey

Gauntlet of Absolution
by Kara Dennison

Past Lives
by Lance Parkin

Valhalla Must Fall!
by Aditya Bidikar

The Other Side
by Jay Eales

Doctor Crocus and the Pages of Fear
by Paul Driscoll

Biographies

And Finally...

PREFACE

> 'Exultantly Morbius shouted, "Your puny mind is powerless against the brain of Morbius. Back, Doctor, back to your beginnings. To your birth — and to your death!" Sarah had a confused impression of even more faces on the screen.'
> (Terrance Dicks, *Doctor Who and the Brain of Morbius*)

In January 1976, when *The Brain of Morbius* was broadcast, four people had played the part of 'Doctor Who' — William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker. Just the four of them. No earlier or alternative Doctors, no missing or hidden or in-between incarnations. It was as simple as that.

Well, except for Peter Cushing. He'd taken on the William Hartnell role in the film adaptations of the first two Dalek stories. But that was it.

Unless you count Trevor Martin, of course, who played the title character in the 1974 stage production *Doctor Who and the Daleks in Seven Keys to Doomsday*. On that basis, if you wanted, you could consider Tom Baker to be the sixth Doctor, but definitely only the sixth.

Except... Edmund Warwick had stood in for Hartnell in location footage for *The Dalek Invasion of Earth*, and played his robot double in *The Chase*. Perhaps, in fairness, he should also be counted? But in that case, what about Brian Proudfoot, another Hartnell stand-in and the first person other than Hartnell to 'play' the character? Or Terry Walsh, who regularly doubled for Pertwee and Baker, or all those who did so for Troughton at different times? Should we include them too?

In short, the question 'How many Doctors have there been?' was already arguable, long before the Richard Hurndall Doctor, the Valeyard, the *Curse of Fatal Death* Doctors, the Shalka Doctor, the War Doctor, the David Bradley Doctor, the Fugitive Doctor, the Timeless Children and any number of incarnations in other media arrived to complicate things further.

So, when *The Brain of Morbius* episode four showed us (and it did so deliberately and, whatever the more conservative species of old-school *Doctor Who* fan may try to tell you, with no significant ambiguity) that Hartnell's 'first' Doctor had at least eight predecessors who'd never been seen on screen, it was really nothing revolutionary — just part of *Doctor Who*'s long history of reinvention and revelation.

These eight so-called `Morbius Doctors' appeared only in still photos. In *The Brain of Morbius*, we glimpse their faces and fractions of their surprising hats, wigs and neckwear, but full upper-body images for all of them exist in the archives. These show an impressive range of costumes, most of them dating appropriately from the centuries preceding Hartnell's Edwardian look. (The exception was taken five years previously, for use as a prop in *Colony in Space*.) The models for all eight were men who had worked behind the scenes at the BBC, mostly on Doctor Who: two writers, two directors, a producer and assorted production staff.

We know that the faces we see during the Doctor's mental duel with Morbius appear from last to first, because they're preceded in order by those of Baker, Pertwee, Troughton and Hartnell. The harder Morbius pushes the Doctor, the further his mental self-image regresses. In the correct chronological order, then, these Doctors are 'played' by:

- **Christopher Barry**, director of *The Brain of Morbius* and nine other *Doctor Who* stories.
- **Robert Banks Stewart**, scriptwriter of the *Doctor Who* stories *Terror of the Zygons* and *The Seeds of Doom* (which followed *The Brain of Morbius*).
- **Christopher Baker**, a BBC production assistant (and the only name on the list not otherwise associated with *Doctor Who*), later a director on series including *Star Cops*.
- **Philip Hinchcliffe**, the producer of *Doctor Who* at the time, who also worked as a screenwriter and script editor.
- **Douglas Camfield**, director of eight Doctor Who stories, including *The Seeds of Doom*.
- **Graeme Harper**, formerly the assistant floor manager on *Colony in Space*, and later the only director to work on Doctor Who in both the 20th and 21st centuries.
- **Robert Holmes**, *Doctor Who*'s then script editor and a prolific writer for the series.
- **George Gallaccio**, *Doctor Who*'s production unit manager from 1974 to 1976, later a producer for the BBC.

Though it's perhaps disappointing that Terrance Dicks, who co-wrote *Morbius* with Holmes under the pseudonym 'Robin Bland', isn't among them, they represent between them an impressive (albeit uniformly white and male) cross-section of the backstage talent working on *Doctor Who* in the 1970s.

For over 40 years, this established part of the Doctor's history has remained surprisingly little explored. Dicks' novelisation devotes one twelve-word sentence to the sequence. Lance Parkin's 1996 *Doctor Who* novel *Cold Fusion* includes a two-page flashback, up to now our only substantive depiction of the Camfield Doctor's life. The *Morbius* faces (excluding Christopher Barry's) appear again in the montage of the 'thirteenth' Doctor's past lives in 2020's *The Timeless Children*. The rest is silence.

And, therefore, wonderfully fertile ground for this unlicensed, unauthorised anthology for charity, which places these Doctors centre stage for the first time. Our eight talented authors (including Lance, who we're delighted to welcome back to write once more for the Camfield Doctor), and our exceptional artist Paul Hanley in his cover and internal illustrations, have taken from these few still photos the slightest of hints relating to these Doctors' personalities, and expanded them into fully-fledged characters, each with their own adventures, adversaries and companions, as they might have been presented had they in fact preceded 1963's *An Unearthly Child*.

Now, you can accompany the Barry Doctor deep into the darkness of a haunted Cornish tin-mine; flee occult effigies across Blitz-era London with the Banks Stewart Doctor; join the first British manned expedition to Venus with the Christopher Baker Doctor and his children; run the gauntlet of an elaborate trial by ordeal with the Hinchcliffe Doctor; bring a retired War criminal to justice with the Camfield Doctor; befriend a superhero and a singing mountain with the Harper Doctor; meddle in cold war politics on a distant planet with the Holmes Doctor; and join the Gallaccio Doctor on his first adventure as he investigates a time-travelling smuggler. And you can do all this in the knowledge that the money you've paid benefits the best of causes (of which more overleaf).

We hope you enjoy these stories, as we have all enjoyed recollecting the forgotten lives of these Doctors, and bringing them once more into the forefront of your memory.

ABOUT THE CHARITY

Alzheimer's Research UK is the UK's leading dementia research charity dedicated to diagnosis, prevention, treatment and cure.

Backed by its passionate scientists and supporters, the charity is challenging the way people think about dementia, bringing together the people and organisations who can speed up progress, and investing in cutting-edge research.

Alzheimer's Research UK believes that medical research can and will deliver life-changing preventions, treatments and one day, a cure for dementia. The charity exists to make this happen and with your support, it will make life-changing breakthroughs possible.

If you'd like to learn more, please go to alzheimersresearchuk.org.

THE KNOCKING IN THE MINESHAFT

Simon Bucher Jones

The following account is taken from the personal papers of the Rev. Daveth Malcolm (1740-1804) of St. Winwaloe's, Gunwalloe, Cornwall. This peculiar story was discovered there, and achieved some notoriety in the early days of the present century.

As the account is in the third person, some historians have dismissed Daveth Malcolm's account as a work of fiction — Ed.

The black and white screen shows a still picture of a windswept shoreline.

The year 1780 had begun with bitter weather and storms along the coast. The blustery squalls concerned the men of Cornwall far more than any distant news. It mattered little in the villages of Gunwalloe and Porthleven that the Battle of Cape St. Vincent had seen an English victory against the Spanish off Portugal, and barely would a man of lesser importance than Squire Penrose hazard a view as to how such action forwarded the war with the colonial rebels. Such things were a world away, less than a haze on the horizon.

A bustling town, dressed as in the 1780s. An actor in seaman's garb comes into close shot.

February, though, saw wounded sea-folk in the streets of Penzance, as the costs of that battle and others came home. Cornishmen had served on the HMS *Bienfaisant* and fallen foul of both Spanish cannonades and smallpox and One such displaced mariner was Jacob Polgareth, twenty-five years of age, near the end of his naval pay and now landed for good. He had sailed, originally, under Admiral Edward Boscawen's command and been mentioned in communications with the Admiralty for his brave part when the *Bienfaisant* had been captured from the French during the Seige of Louisburg. On that vessel, once it had been refitted as a British ship, he had risen to second mate, but his shattered left arm, and scarred face, had left him good for nothing but a return to a home and land that had no doubt thought itself well rid of him nine years before.

The door of a battered farm house, slamming shut.

The Spring saw Jacob at last in his old home, three miles inland of Gunwalloe. His parents being dead, the place had fallen into disrepair, and Jacob fell in with its ruination in every way. On his return to the farm, he sold all the farming tools that required the use of two hands, and settled to a period of steady drinking with the proceeds. He sowed no fresh seed and spoke to no-one if he could avoid it. The land, already left fallow for two years, sprouted nothing but weeds and a fine mob of rooks filled his trees.

A church. The Rector is shown lighting a candle in the nave.

It was thought by the Rector of St Winwaloe's — Daveth Malcolm, who had known Jacob as a child, and been rebuffed upon attempting a visit — that the broken man had no prospect in mind but the pickling of himself, or imbibing so swiftly as to drown in the barrel. The Rector had small time or funds at his disposal for assisting one ex-sailor but he was minded to try to salvage the man, if he could. Seeking an ally in this good work, he bethought him of the new Doctor, one Medec by name, who had lately set up his stall in the town of Helston, in Mollycoddle Lane off Coinagehall Street, and who was making himself known to the district as a sound man for the treatment of sick folk and animals alike.

To a contemporary reader this [Medec] appears to be an assumed name: Medec is a shortening of `medecin', meaning 'doctor' in French — Ed.

Modern visitors will find this [Mollycoddle Lane] has been renamed Lady Street, unless this is a joke on Daveth Malcolm's part — Ed.

A bronze plaque on a dark front door, reading 'Doctor Medec. Ring for Consultation.' The door swings open.

The settling of an incomer, even in so large a town as Helston, which had four spacious streets, a handsome church, good trade, and had long sent two members to Parliament, had not been accomplished easily. Doctor Medec was a fine-looking man with a neat beard, but his demeanour had struck many as being affectedly antiquated, and his eyebrows gave his face a hint of amusement that some had taken as being at their expense. Cornish folk — none more so — appreciated the old ways and gave true service to courtesy, but to be bowed to was no longer looked for commonly, and the suspicion of concealed mockery behind his manners had so far slowed his acquisition of custom. Those few who had availed themselves of his services had little, it is true, to complain of and had spoken up for him heartily. He was as swift with a knife as any surgeon, they said, and had some means of reducing the pain of such procedures.

The Rev. Daveth Malcolm wondered if this might perhaps derive from Priestley's *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air*, for the Rector was a quick-eye'd man for other people's bookshelves (holding that a minute's observation of such equated to a day's tedious scraping of acquaintanceship) and he had observed the six-volume work on first calling on Doctor Medec. The one complaint that most local folk made (aside from the Doctor's manners, although it may have run with them) was his finnicky and absolute insistence on bathing and the washing of his hands and any items coming in contact with the sick or his person, which practically amounted to insulting the cleanliness of his patients and their families. Despite all this, he had as yet killed no one, and his reputation was consequently on the rise. He also was known to be moderate in terms, and willing to let a fee slide, and this latter quality (the Rector thought) would soon endear him to the Cornish, who, while an open-handed folk, were happier to see their money spent on beer than medicines.

It was the 3rd of March 1780 when Rector Malcolm laid the case of Jacob Polgareth before him.

'I am not sure what exactly you expect me to do,' Doctor Medec responded, pushing a decanter of claret across his desk to the Rector and gesturing to the glasses which resided on a side table. 'To be without hope is a great misfortune, and I am sure there may be ways to treat it, but if a man will not come forth to take physic, a Doctor cannot seize him by the scruff of the neck and shake him until he swallows the pills. Then there is the matter of a fee!'

The Doctor raised a hand to stall the Rector's response in which, he foresaw, a plea of clerical poverty and a call to the duties of a Christian would have been mingled. 'A joke, merely — I will assist you for nothing and see what can be done — but I will need a pretext to call upon the man lest he believe he, is being hounded by that most intolerable and inexorable emotion, pity.' He seemed to the Rector to be considering something, and then apparently changed the topic. 'I am glad you called, though, for I wanted to ask you about something concerning one of my few patients.'

'I will help if I can, although if they have confided anything in me...'

'I don't think it is a matter of that kind. It is a puzzling one. though I was able to mend Ros Dyer's leg, and he was without means to pay, so bartered me his good luck-piece. He credited it with preserving his life in that rock fall in the old tin mine that broke his leg and saw it mis-set. I said to him I'd have seen greater value in a luck-piece that had stopped him having full four years of pain by keeping him out of the mine in the first place, but he'd said he'd show me a wonder. And, by God — no offence toy our reverence — he did. Look at this.'

The Doctor got out of his desk a flat oval pebble or piece of stone maybe an inch long, and half an inch across. It was blue-grey in colour and swirled with white lines.

'I have seen such stones,' Rector Malcolm said. 'The white lines are the remains of ancient shells, pressed into the rock by the force of the Great Flood, or...' He took a sip of claret. '...At any rate an ancient action of nature. I will not presume to stand on doctrine.'

'So I thought, but do you not see a pattern in the lines? Here, pick up the stone, and look closely at it — concentrate your attention upon it.'

As the Rector did so, the lines and twirls of white seemed to move around and across the surface of the bluestone, until they formed a clear map of what seemed the familiar Cornish coast. There surely was the two-pronged end of the peninsula, like a clumsy hand: Porthgwarra and Porthcurno on the underside of the upper fingers, Penzance at the join of thumb to hand, and the sweep of the bay down the line of the thumb, Marazion, Rinsey, Porthleven. and Gunwalloe.

'Goodness me! Good-ness me!' Rector Daveth, said, and let the stone fall to the desk top. 'Extra-ordinary!'

There was a rap as the stone bounced on the hard wood, then —although it lay still — there was another, and another. Two raps more than its fall could account for, in quick succession.

'I think,' the Rector said, 'that I'd be glad to take another glass of wine. I've lived here all my life, and this is the first time I have seen one of their gifts with my own eyes, but I do not see that there can be any doubt. Do you have such creatures in London, Doctor? As the Knockers?'

'In London? Ah yes.' The Doctor glanced at the study wall, where a diploma from St. Dunstan's College, and a separate ornate vellum document setting out his medical

credentials, hung in two plain frames either side of a painting. 'I studied at St. Dunstan's to acquire an account of what should be known to any one practicing medicine in this…' He hesitated and Daveth thought from his eyebrows that he was amused, or perhaps disgusted, by something. '...most scientifical age, before arriving here.'

'I noted it,' the Rector said, somewhat sheepishly. 'I'm afraid I am an incorrigible pryer into the histories of my parishioners. The study of mankind, is, ah, after all, man. I did not recognise the University of your Doctorate, I must confess.' *Dear me*, the Rector thought, *was that rude of me? I did not mean it so.* The Reverend Daveth Malcolm found himself, unusually, at a loss for words. After all what did it matter if a man's University wasn't Oxford or Cambridge, or St. Andrews, or Edinburgh? There must be another in Scotland, or maybe the Isles, of which he hadn't heard.

In 1780 only seven Universities existed in Great Britain: Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, and Marischal College (Scotland). There were medical colleges recently founded in both London and Scotland, though, one of which may have supplied Doctor Medec's credentials. — Ed.

No doubt it was good for all that, or why display it? The crest, mostly circular, was unknown to him, and the motto — *A Tempore Cognita: Venit Dominio* — seemed barely poor Church Latin, though it could he supposed be construed as 'from a time of learning, cometh forth lordship,' which was at least ambitious. The matter was no business of his. The evidence of the man's work was in the words of his patients, and that so far had been good, even if their numbers had been small.

Between the two testimonials as to the Doctor's licence to practice was a more personal item, by which the Rector's interest had also been piqued, and which he now saw no easy way to question. This was an old oil painting, somewhat singed as if by fire, in what would once have been an expensive frame. It appeared to be — save for its evident age — the Doctor himself, dressed in nothing less than the courtly garments of the Elizabethan Age. Was it an ancestor? the Rector wondered to himself. If so, the likeness was striking. He might almost think the small ruff of the later Elizabethan period, the padded and gold-threaded, black doublet, and the black hat with its single feather were worn by the man before him. Save for the costume and the glint of a gold wedding ring, the man in the painting might have been the Doctor himself. The canvas was signed only with two initials, `S.P.', and a date, '1598'. The uncomfortable pause in the conversation, in which the Rector had allowed his thought to become so distracted, drew out, and Daveth was about to rephrase his question when the Doctor picked up the stone and proceeded to spin it as if it were a coin.

The fashion expanded with the importance of starch, but for men small ruffs were experiencing a resurgence by 1600. An attempt was made by the Cornish Historical and Psychic Society in 1961 to identify the painting. One suggestion — made by a professional medium — is that it may have been a lost work by Scipione Pulzone produced shortly before his death — the Portrait of An English Physician *mentioned in a letter to Margherita Gonzaga, one of his patronesses, as 'given to my other great and esteemed benefactor, who gave me that hope that sustained me at the last' — in which case, the Doctor's family may have had Italian connections despite his Anglo-French name — Ed.*

'Have you noticed that it's hard to talk about them? Even to keep thinking about them. As if they don't like it? You asked me a perfectly easy question and before I could answer, our minds have swept on to other things. And things, perhaps at that, calculated to provoke mistrust between us, to make us less able to turn our minds to them.'

The spinning stone flashed and flickered, its speed impossibly building up — as none of the laws of nature ought to have permitted. As it spun, the image lines on it seemed to show the whole earth, or at least parts seemed to follow the maps of Europe and the Americas known to the Rector, although Terra Australis seemed to be not a massive continent to rival Europe, but a smaller body surrounded by islands, with a polar mass below.

'It doesn't just show what the viewer knows, then?' the Rector said. 'Cornwall is as familiar to me as my hand, but not even the greatest mariners know the true coastlines of the Antipodes. Do you think those lands are truly laid out as it has them?'

'I have some knowledge of my own that suggests they are correct — and for that reason, I cannot tell if it takes the pictures from my mind, or has some store of information in it.' The Doctor stopped the stone spinning, swiftly, as if — the Rector thought — he was afeared of it possibly showing more of his mind to his visitor.

'It is a wonder, most certainly. And Knocker-work, I readily believe. You know, I suppose, then what the miners have always said?'

'I have read a little of it, but as a stranger would appreciate the account of a man both local and wise.'

Flattered, though aware and wary of the flattery, Daveth rubbed his chin. 'As a clergyman I cannot proport to believe such things, but as a Cornishman I take them as seriously as any gospel. Our miners have always told of strange knockings sometimes heard on mineshaft walls. Never is anything seen, save a shadow moving just at the edge of sight, but the unearthly rappings lead to rich veins of ore, or guide a man away before a rock falls. Some, say the sounds are the ghosts of miners long dead. Some say they are fae, and mine for things man has no use for, below or behind our diggings. To try to spy them is both considered impossible, and the worst of ill-luck to attempt — and certain tokens, stones with symbols on, are found where they have been heard in great numbers. Sometimes, for being left unseen, they leave a larger gift or a more uncanny one, as this Bluestone appears to be.'

'Have they ever been seen? '

'Have you had a case of Barker's knee among your patients yet?'

'From kneeling in the mine — what the London gentry would call housemaid's knee, or the rheumatics? Yes, I have treated a couple of old men for it.'

'Did they say why they call it that?'

'No, and they took my ignorance of it as a fine jest, in a "furreign" Doctor, as showing my lack of knowledge of the serious world of the mine.'

'In my great grandfather's time or before, a miner named Barker vowed to capture a Knocker — believing, or claiming to believe, that such a creature would have, like the Leprechauns of the men of Ireland, a fine horde of gold, or perhaps be able to lead him to a splendid vein of tin for its release. It may be worth saying that he hailed from Devon, and was not much respected, for he was considered greedy as to the acquisition of wealth and slow in its openhanded spending. He was reputedly cunning, and while it is said he never saw a Knocker, he found a place where, by echo and chance, their deep discourse was capable of being heard, and set to learn of their language. By what means he did so in the dark without demonstration or instruction, the legend does not say — though diabolic assistance is surely hinted at — but after after a time he managed to learn their Faery speech sufficiently to hear them express their annoyance at his presence, and their plan to "leave their Faery tools on his knee." This expression was made in so inhuman a tone that

he took fear and fled to his bed — only to arise the next morning in a dreadful cold pain, as if rods of ice had been inserted into his knee-joint. He consulted many a doctor, but was never free from it, thereafter — and the term for pains of the knee has come down to us in the phrase "stiff as Barker's knee," which our miners use.'

'Indeed — and he knew their language you say? That is most intriguing. As, I suppose is their restraint with their cold tools — for they did not kill him. That suggests a certain knowledge of anatomy, and a certain sense of ethics.'

'I am not sure what you are proposing should be done, Doctor? My advice would be to leave such spirits to their knocking. Your patient will recover well enough, I have no doubt.'

Tim. I will need a reason to call upon your friend Jacob. Would he have any experience of the old mines hereabouts?'

'His father farmed, but his father's two brothers were miners — and I believe Jacob went down as a lad before deciding he preferred the chance of drowning in the wet to being buried in the dry earth. He might be able to assist you, but I must warn you that his mood is sullen and unfit for the company of man or beast.'

'I won't let that bother me,' Doctor Medec said, drinking up his own small glass of sherry (half the size of the generous one he had poured for the Rector), 'many of my best friends are neither man nor beast.' And he let the Rector puzzle over that remark as he showed him to the door.

* * *

It was mid-March before the Doctor's duties took him past Polgareth farm and his mare happening, as it seemed, to throw a shoe, he banged upon Jacob's door seeking assistance-.

Presumably the Doctor or Jacob later give an account of this visit to the Rector — Ed.

'I cannot help you, man,' the scrub-bearded and dishevelled figure of Jacob grumbled, as — roused no doubt from late slumber — he unbolted the door and blinked in the noon-light. 'I've no blacksmithing tools and no two hands to use them, as you'd know full well if ye weren't an outlet'

'Perhaps, I could just see for myself?' The Doctor said cheerfully. 'All sorts of things can be left around an old place that has not yet been set straight. As for your arm, I will gladly give you my medical opinion on it for the fee of being permitted to look in your outhouses. And perhaps, you would take a small beer with me — I have two bottles in my saddle bags — and give me your opinion of the Misses Gloyn up the way. Will they take it very hard that I am late in my calling? Should I perforce return anon with an offer of cherry cake?'

'Hmph. You may look all you wish for tools you won't find, but I'll thank you to keep your eye off my arm. The King's doctors of the Navy have done their work and there's no mending that. Nor, Doctor Medec — for I have heard your unlikely name mooted round — do I take kindly to the suggestion that I gossip about my neighbours. Howbeit, I will drink a bottle with you, for no man will call me unwilling to toast a visitor.'

And thereafter things went easier between them. Examination of the arm there was none, but the sweet odd beer whose brewery was not local, seemed to set Jacob up a treat — and he owned that his wounds felt better than they had for some time, being at least

free from pain. Nor, eventually, did he prove unamenable to telling the Doctor his history, and the two found wrapped in oil-skins at the back of a hay-barn, as if laid there when new, a set of smithy tools and some shoenails. The Doctor did the shoeing himself, and heated the iron with some new-fang led thing from the City out of his saddlebag — but he thanked Jacob profusely nevertheless, as if he'd done all of it. By the time they parted, Jacob had somehow promised to show the Doctor the old mine, and the Doctor had more or less guaranteed that Jacob would have some feeling back in his dead left hand before the end of the month. While that was, Jacob no doubt thought, a roguish and even a wicked thing to promise a sick man, he was convivial enough to let it pass as a jest, and to feel that he had met a great character.

* * *

Jacob is cutting back an overgrown bush, clumsily, but he can use his left arm — a little.

It was, however, nothing but the truth, and from the Doctor's calling, Jacob's arm began to mend — slowly and not without pain, as if it had to remember how to feel through layers of numbness, the peeling back of each of which could not but be a discomfort. He continued to meet the Doctor, and was civil again to the Rector too, and began to take an interest in the life of the village. It was in the second week of April that he took them both on a journey into the mine.

The tin mines of Cornwall date back to Roman times, it is said, or older. Some say the Phoenicians bought tin here to alloy with copper for bronze, and that Jesus himself walked the Cornish roads as a child with Joseph of Arimathea on a trip to trade for the bright useful metal. The Rector raised the latter as a mere myth, but he had a boyish pride in his voice at even daring to think that he might be treading in the steps of the Messiah.

'The mines will have a great destiny, yet.' The Doctor opined, 'if the industry of the land continues with its steam engines and smelting. James Watt will create new demands you may be sure. You might put some lads to re-open these old places, and have a bright future in the century coming. Why in fifty years, you could have nine hundred men earning a good living.'

'You are a dreamer, Doctor Medec — and no mistake. I'll be lucky to see out five years, hand to mouth.' But Jacob smiled as he said it for the pins and needles in his finger ends made him trust the strange Doctor's ability to foresee. 'Come, let us make attempt if the creatures that intrigue you will grace us with their knocking.'

It was dark in the mine, though it was noon outside — for very soon they passed beyond where light naturally fell. It was cool too, though the Spring had come up as hot as Summer, and Jacob told them that temperature where the mining was done was always clement — for the the stone stored the heat in the Summer and released it in Winter, and it might boil or a freeze above and still be shirtless working weather below.

After a notably cold January and February, according to parish records — Ed.

The Doctor told them that he had a desire to try an experiment — but that he would not require them to be present for it, if the thought alarmed them — by which the Knockers might be persuaded to let their noises be heard. He had brought down three ingenious lamps, which did not appear to use oil, but which gave a bright light — the which could be doused and set on at the press of a lever. With one each he proposed that they penetrate as deep as possible into the mine, and that he then be left in darkness to make such rappings and clatterings as ought to set any self-respecting mining goblins to wish to make reply.

Both men refused to let him pursue this quest alone, however, and the three set out with good will. The Rector was very pleased with the progress made in bringing Jacob back to the company of his fellows, and considered the expedition in that light. Jacob was pleased to be an authority on something, able to lecture both the learned men - and his left hand was growing stronger. He could use it to wasp the rocks, and feel his way. What pleased the Doctor, beyond curiosity, was less certain, but his eves gleamed in the light of his strange lamps.

The experiment succeeded, perhaps beyond what two of the party would have predicted. For the knocking made by the Doctor did not long remain unheard and unrepeated. There in the dry cool dark with the lights extinguished, the banging of tools in the deep, coming up from below that deepest level wrought by Cornish men, set a shiver down Daveth Malcolm's back.

'I like this not, Doctor Medec, I must say,' he whispered. 'What good can be had from stirring up such things?'

'To know and understand a thing is to remove one's fear of it.'

'Bah! What song the Sirens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture. What lies beneath the cold hard ground, with all the famous nations of the dead, is quite another matter!'

The Rector here is paraphrasing Sir Thomas Browne — Ed.

'I share the Rector's doubts,' Jacob said. 'I think we should be out of this place. Honest miners know the Knockers may well tolerate or even help, but nosey-prying folk they have ever abhorred. I feel I owed you afore this but let us consider that debt paid.' He scrambled back in the dark neglecting to throw the lever that would have released light to guide him, and uttered a sudden yelp of panic.

'I touched one, God save me, I touched one! It was soft like a slug, and all a-quiver.'

'Don't light up,' the Doctor shouted, but the Rector's hand was already on the lever of his lantern, and its beam of pearly luminescence shot out, carving a fan-shaped slice from the darkness. The Knockers were not fairies, or any supernatural thing out of folklore. They were something no man had seen, nor should ever see.

An image flashes of a cavern with a low sloping ceiling the shadows of the Doctor and Jacob are cast dark by the Rector's lantern; something tendril-like whisks away out of the light into the darkness of the shadows.

There was a sound like a horrible rattling, and the three men clutched for each other's sleeves to orientate themselves in the dark. After the moment of brightness, the night vision they had developed was quite gone, and the blackness roiled in like a great infinite tide.

'Come on!' the Doctor cried and pushed the two, not without some scrapes and bruises, out of that narrow way, into a broader gallery. 'Well, well' , he gasped, 'that was very interesting, very interesting indeed. I think we have definitely made a discovery.'

'Discovery be damned!' the Rector said 'We have stirred up something from the pit, in this place — may the Good Lord have mercy on us.'

They burst back into the light of day and — though it was late afternoon with storm clouds brewing a threatened thunderstorm that the dry land much needed — the light hurt their eyes and made them wince and blink.

The next day, the Rector's right foot was paralysed with an icy pain from big toe to heel, and on Jacob's right hand, where he had touched the Knocker in the dark, there was a strange spiral mark like a burn or a brand. Called for, the Doctor treated both men swiftly — with odd but effective medicines — and by noon both the pain and the mark were gone. All three were shaken, though, and if the urbane Doctor showed it least, he was still not immune to the strangeness of the darkness, nor to what they had seen in that flash of light.

They took council in the Rector's parlour. 'What should we do, Jacob? It was one thing to believe such creatures existed, another to have seen... what they are. Should I try to exorcise the mine, do you think? The very thought makes me tremble, I do not scruple to admit!'

'At present,' said Jacob, 'they may have the old mine and be grateful for it. Why disturb them with bells? But if as you say, Doctor, the mines will be needed again to put bread into the mouths of men and women and their children, then we need some way to make them safe from such beasts. I have seen the great jellyfish they call the Portuguese Man-o'-War or the floating terror, but the like of them things I've never seen, nor do I wish to do so again.'

'I wonder if their rattling and clattering is a language?' The Doctor mused, half to himself. 'Talking things, things that engineer their own deep mine, may not be animals. Imagine if they could be spoken to! What might we learn? It's nothing like any tongue on record. I normally have quite a gift for languages, but this is peculiar. Eventually, once supposes, all possible languages might be codified, but that time has yet to come.' He rattled the Rector's ink stand on his desk top and made a sound so close to that which they had heard in the mine that Daveth Malcolm shuddered.

'I think there may be things whose conversation is perilous to the living, Doctor. I cannot think of these balls of slime as having speech and reason, as men do. It is intolerable!'

'Perhaps they find us as horrible as you find them. To them we must be great lanky creatures, all ossified bone and bristles' Doctor Medec brushed his fine beard, thoughtfully. 'If only Barker, he of the wrecked knee, had thought to leave some notes of his understanding. I wonder — does anyone know what became of him at the last?'

'Dead and buried, a hundred and seventy years. You may see his gravestone if you wish. He left no family to tend it, but it still shows his name.'

'Nothing else? No inscriptions?'

'I do not believe so, but I own to my neglect of the graveyard. There could be something.'

'As long as it is not absolutely ruled out. And I recall you said he consulted doctors? In Helston, or further afield? Do the stories say?'

'Penzance at least, perhaps even the city of Truro, though it was not a city proper in his day.'

'No, of course. That's right.' Doctor Medec stood up. need to consult my ancestor's notes — it's a very, very, long shot, but perhaps the hand of providence is with us. You recall the painting, Rector? I come from, it might be said, a line of Doctors — and we have always been drawn to the unusual in our practice. A case like Barker's would have interested my, ah, ancestor, and it is conceivable that a Truro or Penzance physician might have referred the matter to him. I believe he might have been in Cornwall about that time too, and it might just be so. Could we meet at the church, in perhaps three hours?'

After the Doctor had left, Jacob shook his head, and looked long at Daveth Malcolm. 'Is he quite right in his wits, do you think? Either there is something inscribed on the gravestone that may help us or there is not. I say we go look now —I doubt me that by any chance his illustrious ancestor will have nosed out Barker's case. What would be the odds of that?'

'Unless the reason he himself came to Helston is that very connection. Still, mysterious as he may be, this Doctor who came to dwell amongst us, it cannot be denied that his craft is subtle. Look how your arm has come nigh back to a strong man's grasp.

'Mayhap, but is there not something in the Bible, Reverend, about cutting off an arm or hand that offendeth thee? We saw no such things as this before he was settled in Helston.'

'Saw, no — but he cannot bear the accusation of their cause. They have been heard for half a thousand years, deep in the Cornish rock — no living man can be to blame for that. Come, Jacob, he had done us no harm, and though his manner be at times abrupt, I believe that verily he is a good man.'

'Still, we may forestall him in examining the gravestone, and have for once the truth of a matter first. It is your graveyard and your right, after all.'

With some unease the Rector agreed, and the two set off for Barker's lonely grave. The walk from the Rector's was a pleasant one though the wind was up. The church was perched atop Church Cove, and the graveyard lay inland to the northwest. The church was three' wde, not cruciform like later churches, and its tower stood on its own. The grave itself was tucked against the west wall. Long over grown by the foliage of an old oak, it looked sadly unvisited, and the carving on the forward face of the gravestone was worn and cracked.

The Rector bent to inspect it and gave a sharp cry, as of horror. Jacob caught the man he fell back. 'Whatever is the matter Daveth?' he asked — his concern shown in his ignoring of his old friend's title. `Read me the date of Barker’s death'

'1612'.

'Yes, of course it is — a hundred and sixty-eight years ago — and yet I could have sworn a moment since that...'

'What Rector, what did you see?'

'Nothing possible, and nothing that I can clearly recall. I was convinced for a moment — my memory must be going, as my age advances — that the man died in 1610... and it seemed to me, I think, that I saw at first that date upon the stone, and then with a twinkling it was gone, the zero becoming a two as I watched it.'

It's devil's work, if so, and in consecrated ground no less.'

'Ahem'. They turned and saw the Doctor. His brows were drawn down and he looked fierce and out of temper. 'I said three hours, gentlemen and at the church. I hope you have not come to any misfortune. still, I have things to report. I had hoped that all would be in my family writings, if I could but lay hands upon the pages, and my enquiry about the gravestone was but a venture at one remove from my hope. Still, it seems both are entwined — entangled, one might say.

'I have here a manuscript written by Barker and left in the care of my family in lieu of payment for treatment — a practice I note the Cornish still cling to.'

'And it explains how the Knockers' language works?'

'To a point, it does — thereafter all one needs, is, as it were, a key, as if this were a cypher — and that Barker would not give up in his lifetime, lest the fae strike him again with their cold bolts. However, he undertook to have it carved upon his gravestone, so that it

might last until retrieved. Such a practice I know to have been associated with Cornishmen and smuggler's trove, and thought it possible.'

'There is nothing on the stone,' the Rector said, 'but the man's name and the date of his death. One hundred and sixty-eight years ago, as I believe I told you.' But the Rector found his memory still at fault, for the grave showed two names on its well-scrubbed surface, those of John Barker, and of his wife Lamorna, and he recalled now the marriage record from his readings in the old registry long kept in the Church.

The grave had been carefully tended by descendants of Barker's daughter Elowen, born of his late marriage, and Jacob had no need to pull back the branches of the nearby oak, to see it in the round but he did so nevertheless — exulting in his ability to use the arm that had been so damaged 'See, Rector, here though, there is a carving on the reverse of the stone. Well maintained it is, as the front. I can make nothing of the main part, which is symbols, perhaps Greek? But at the bottom there is a line of English. "For two years of painless life, and more, received as an unlooked-for benison, this knowledge is here inscribed. Let those who have the wit, read it and be still wiser."'

Doctor Medec and the Rector Daveth Malcolm craned their necks to see around the stone. Not Greek, though the alphabet is similar,' the Rector said. 'Is this how they would write their knockings down, do you suppose, or is it a transcription into another tongue?'

'I believe it will suffice,' Doctor Medec said, 'to put us on the right trail to the understanding we need. If you gentlemen will give me time to work on it, and not run ahead like yapping puppies.' He bit at his lip and waved a hand depreciatingly. 'Forgive me, that is unfair. I have had to do things that tremble on the edge of the forbidden, and I will not expose anyone to things they have no need to know of.' Saying no more, he turned and strode away from the graveyard. The others wondered how he had gone from the Rector's to Helston and back in the brief time of his absence, and had moreover searched through the records of which he had spoken.

It was true that a dark horse stood patiently by the postern gate, and that mounting it, the Doctor rode away as swiftly as a sure horseman, but even so there had been scant time for all that had occurred. Both Jacob and the Rector kept their own counsel that night, but the Rector, whose sharp eyes had been betrayed by the gravestone so mysteriously, had seen something else that had been weighed upon him, that he could not easily understand. Doctor Medec's throat rubbed red in a line, as if he had been — very recently — wearing a too-tight collar or a band about his Adam's apple. The Rector could not but be reminded of the tight small ruff of the man’s Elizabethan ancestor, but that was ridiculous. A man would not dress as his ancestor to search out his household records. Nor would the wearing of a ruff for an hour leave such a mark.

The next day, calling on them both, Doctor Medec made arrangements for a return to the mine. 'Are there men of the village you can trust to come with us? No more than two or three, in case things do not proceed as hoped. We must be guarded against rock falls, or lack of strength'

'Gerren Thomas, who sings tenor in the choir, is a good man and brawny. Peran Michaels, too can lay his hand to a plough firmly — and is one to be reckoned with, if not in his cups,' the Rector said. 'Do you wish to suggest a third, Jacob?'

'I? I have scarce been in the village since my return from sea, except to buy food and drink. Does Simon Penrose still move among the common folk now his father grows old? It might be as well to have a witness the Squire would heed.'

'That is a good thought. I will rouse them. Do we go to the mine this day, or by night?'

'I have some things to prepare,' the Doctor said. 'It will be tonight or tomorrow. Some things can be done in the twinkling of an eye if one works with a good will; others have a time that must go minute by minute, as a clock does.'

And he said no more, save to wish them well, and ride off — tricorn hat clamped to his head, and his dark outfit as black as his horse, save for the white of his cuffs and shirt collar.

* * *

In the end it was noon of the next day when the six men entered the mine. Only five would ever leave it.

Surface-dug seams led downward through a large open area or stope, down into the deeper workings. Shards of rock made narrow and triangular passages that guided them further: the air was still and heavy, as if a thunderstorm was brewing — not above the mine, but somehow deep within it. The Doctor's three lanterns (he had not produced three more) cast their cold, weird light, and disturb some toads that must have fallen in from the surface and been unable to make their way back. He stuffed them in the pockets of his long black coat, to Peron Michael's disgust. 'I'll release them later,' Doctor Medec said, as if it were the most natural action in the world.

'Use 'em in his medicine more like,' Peran mumbled, for his distrust of doctors was well since his rich Uncle had lived on so long by their help.

It was not long before they came to where the knocking had been heard

The Doctor began to bang the rock with a will, and a large stone — but not as random as before. Rather, he made a sound very like that of the Knockers themselves 'Imagine if you will he remarked, 'a family bred and trapped in the darkness, generation upon generation — each eking out its strength more and more, hoarding resources more fiercely, compacting even their language to a few staccato echoes. Coming in the end to something like the fundamental building-blocks of language itself. A great discovery stumbled upon by the driving force of sheer need. They have some tremendous task they wish to accomplish, and it may even now be nearing its end.'

'How can you possibly deduce that?' the Rector asked.

'They are less careful. Our even seeing them showed that. Also, they give away more things. It wasn't just Ros Dyer who'd had some strange, oddly-shifting thing from out of this old mine. Nor have they spared their cold-bolts. I have treated at least four children for such — and I worry they may grow more militant yet in their defence. In my ancestor's time they were rumour; now they are nearly out in the world — for good or ill. I seek to know why.'

The sound of answering drum-beats, of pattering knocks like rain where no rain ever fell, fell chill over the men. And Peran Michael clutched at the Rector's sleeve as the lights were shut off.

'They are digging something out,' the Doctor said. 'Something very deep, lost a long time ago. They were made —bred, perhaps? — for that sole purpose; to set the thing again on its long journey across the night sky.'

'Are you saying there is a shooting star, buried here?' the a note of awe coming into his voice.

Rector asked, `Something you might think of as one. A thing on a long slow voyage across the arch of the heavens. Its fall here a mere accident, its long recovery the work of perhaps twenty thousand years of the slow, slow, movement of rock after rock, by soft mechanisms.'

'It is some demon,' Peran spat, 'that these worms in the earth dig for —no good can come of the uprising of such.'

'There, perhaps you may be right.' The Doctor's voice took on a sepulchral tone in the dark. 'Not that I think the thing evil — only old, and indifferent to us, and perhaps on a different octave of time entirely, so that our motions are too swift and inconsequent to register upon it. When it is let forth, if that time be soon, it may set fire through this whole mine to raise it back to the stars. It may burn up the whole of Cornwall for aught I know. So hush, gentlemen, and let me talk to its small servants as best I can.'

Back and forth ran the knocking, but Doctor Medec seemed to find no common ground on which to persuade the Knockers to cease to delve. To free the thing below was all their concern, and of the fate of the people of Cornwall, or even of their own, they seemed to lack any conception.

'They do not care that they will be consumed in the flames.' The Doctor sounded almost despairing in the dark. 'They have no sense of self, and I doubt they truly understand that we do. Their interaction with mankind has been based on the simplest of principles — reward or hurt — nothing subtler.' He sounded as if he was on the point of giving up. 'The subtle can be tricked or manipulated, and with them there is always the hope of diplomacy or self-interest - but the simple are a musket ball in flight, and cannot be talked from the target.'

'Do you believe the creatures lack souls, then?' Daveth Malcolm asked. That they work as a stream works flowing to the sea, or a rock as it falls?'

'I believe them to have the potential for self-awareness, but not to have taken that step. Yet they are on the road to it — the way their language has changed shows that they are not immutable. Perhaps the end of their task is a double tragedy, for if they conclude it soon, they will have lost the possibility of becoming more than they are.'

'I understand none of this,' Gerren Thomas broke in, 'but if the thing they seek to free is so old — pent here from before the flood — would not another thousand years or so be but an hour to it. Is there nothing that could lengthen the task, and buy them a chance — as well as safety for our children and their children's children?'

'Delay rather than stop? It's a thought, certainly. Perhaps if I could examine one of them closely, I might learn something, but we know that is risky. They have struck only to hurt and to dissuade so far as we know, but a cold-bolt might stop a heart, as quick as hurt a knee or lame a foot.'

If you wish to be relieved of responsibility Doctor, I know my father would wish his tenants and the free folk of Cornwall safe from these creatures, This mine is on his land — can we not seal it, and give them more yet to die' Simone Penrose made this suggestion, tentatively as a man o'erawed by circumstances.

'Be damned to the lot of you! I'll not stay here a moment more in the dark to be affrighted by hobgoblins and talk of disaster.' Peran Michaels' voice was shrill with fear, 'Do as you will — but you must fare without me, and I'll be taking one of yon lights to see me to the surface.'

Daveth Malcolm gasped, 'Peran what are you — arrgh!'

'Don't make me hurt you, Rector — this small knife is sharp, and in the dark, a man might slip. Just give me your lantern.'

'Daveth' — the Doctor's voice — 'Give him it; let him go. It isn't worth getting hurt over.'

There was a clatter and a flash of light.

'Shield your eyes!' The shout was the Doctor's. There was a sound as the Knockers that a softly surrounded them converged on the man with the lantern. They hated to be seen, it was said. But maybe that had been always to read into their actions something that existed only because of the observers' fear of the unknown. They reacted to light, yes. Flowed towards it. Absorbed it. Extinguished it. But whether that was from a desire for darkness or a terrible need for energy, who could say?

And in the dark the cries of Peran Michaels were gone.

'Get down everyone, the lantern-energy may...' The Doctor did not, could not finish, for there was an explosion of light.

The sound set their heads ringing, and falling rocks coming down hit and confused them. The darkness was full of tumult and of anger. Hands clasped to forearms as a human chain, they strove to make their way up and out. Then, as they clambered over a fall of rocks, a faint light showed an outline beneath the shards and boulders. One of the soft creatures whose knocking had brought them here was pinned beneath the fallen debris. Lights moved and showed on its pulplike skin, as if light was its blood.

'It's hurt,' Daveth Malcolm said. 'Doctor, help me shift the rock.' The Doctor seemed to hesitate, but then set his shoulder to the boulder, and Geffen and Simon added their strength.

The Knocker squeezed its way out between the fractionally wider gap made possible by their efforts, and it lay — expanding and contracting — as if it were an injured man gasping for breath. With each expansion, light went out from it, and each contraction drew it back, and each contraction was a single knock in the dark.

Then there were seven other creatures round it, all responding to its cycle, and then they began to knock out a different rhythm. Seizing a rock, the Doctor began to reply.

* * *

'They were closer to knowing themselves than I knew. To see that we, despite the death of one of us, would stop and try to help; would try to free one of them; would act as if they had their own value... it gave the others a new thought,'

'And they will let their sleeping master sleep?' Jacob asked.

'For as long as men live on the hills above, they say. It's all but an hour to them. They have their duty, but they have felt concern, and having felt it they extend it to us. There is a King under the Hill, but he will sleep, and the only knocking will be to make his resting-place more comfortable.'

'Perhaps,' the Doctor said, 'you'll all come and take a beer with me, and drink to the men of Cornwall, who are stout foes to tyrants but compassionate to those who dig in the earth — whatever they look like, and however they sound.'

HOUSE OF IMAGES
Phillip Purser-Hallard

The usual dreadful creaking and bellowing from the rooms above the dusty office informed me that the Doctor would soon be coming down to check on my progress. I really don't know what he does up there to make that racket. If you asked me, I'd have to guess that he's trying to invent a mechanical walrus, and enjoying some success.

Honestly, Auntie, I wouldn't put it past him. My employer is a strange man, with obsessive interests and a deeply peculiar sense of humour.

I'd come to work as usual that morning, though I'd spent a rotten night with Mrs Evans and the other lodgers in the shelter. I'd crawled back into bed when the all clear sounded, and still hadn't got back to sleep when it was time to catch my bus.

The raid had hit a haberdashery near Oxford Circus, and all the wreckage was festooned with gaily-coloured ribbons. I watched while workmen cleared some rubble, and envied the pedestrians on the way to their shops and offices. I was indignant, though, to see some of them snatching the ribbons to keep as souvenirs. Some beasts think of nobody but themselves whilst others hazard everything to protect them.

I got off at Portland Place and walked the rest of the way, calling in at Mr Fine's to collect the morning papers, until I reached the anonymous office whose plaque reads **BRUCE, BRAE AND BUTE** and whose staff, other than its eccentric proprietor, I constitute in its entirety.

I let myself in with my key as usual, and gathered up the usual sheaf of letters from the letter-box. The Doctor was not in evidence, but this is nothing out of the ordinary. I've known him to skulk upstairs for days at a time, as silent as a hibernating bear... until the arrival of that horrendous shrieking noise, which invariably presages his deigning to show his face. Perhaps it's his idea of an alarm-clock.

I still don't know the Doctor's name. He's never told me whether he's Bruce, Brae or Bute — though since he has never mentioned any partners, he could be all of them. They

are all Scottish names, I believe, and if one can judge by an accent then the Doctor himself is a Scot, but I can say little more than that.

My first task of the day, even before going through the Doctor's correspondence, is to look through the newspapers, circling articles of particular note. Over my last few months' working for him I've come to know the Doctor's foibles. Oh, he always reads about the War eventually, sighing and puffing to himself, but that isn't where his real interest lies. His first love is news of the grotesque or supernatural, then antiquarian or archaeological stories, and finally mysterious or bizarre incidents, on any scale and in any place. He professes to believe that the most minor accident can have a decisive effect on grand historical events — *for want of a nail*, I suppose, though the idea seems very doubtful to me.

The ribbons in Oxford Street were exactly the sort of thing that would tickle his fancy. I would have told him about them, but for the fear that he would immediately go haring down there and start collecting them for himself.

The Doctor reserves a particular disdain, though, for stories of the ordinary doings of royalty, politicians and film-actors, which he considers quite the wrong kind of trivia. This gave me an interesting dilemma on this particular morning, but after some consideration I circled the story in question, and moved on to a herd of wallabies escaped from a menagerie in Somerset.

As the elephantine warbling subsided, I set aside the *Daily Worker*, my final paper of the morning, and collected together the Doctor's correspondence. A moment later, the door to the stairs was unlocked and opened with its perennial crash, and the Doctor strode in, tall leather boots clomping upon the parquet floor.

'Morning, Miss Weston!' he declared, his mellifluous voice theatrical as always. 'And what has the world to offer us today?'

I sighed, and tried as always to resist the temptation to ask him, 'Why on Earth are you dressed like that, Doctor?' As always, I failed.

This time he was wearing some get-up from the Middle Ages, the sort of thing you'd see in a portrait of an Italian nobleman, a fur-collared cape over a leather jerkin and white neckerchief. On entering he'd politely doffed an absurd hat that made me think of Christopher Columbus. Oh, it's far from the most ludicrous thing I've seen him in. On one occasion he appeared wearing a Chinese mandarin's robes, on another an intact leopardskin over formal eveningwear. Whatever else he might do to amuse himself, secluded in his upper storey, he keeps what must amount to a well-stocked theatrical wardrobe.

'I've been in Germany,' he told me in that same resonant boom —offhandedly, absurdly and, given how I had spent my own night, in remarkably poor taste. 'Saxe-Wittenberg, to be precise. I met a charming fellow called Johannes Faust.' He massaged his shoulder. 'Said he was a university professor, but if you ask me he should take up arm-wrestling on a professional basis.'

I tutted, and began pointedly opening the envelopes. The Doctor fancies himself a modern-day Baron Munchausen — another legendary German, of course — telling ridiculous stories of impossible exploits with a cherubic conviction. It would be difficult to imagine a less innocent cherub than the Doctor, though, with his asymmetric, slightly jowly face. On such occasions, I can tell from twinkle twin in hiss eyes that he knows he is not believed, and finds the fact vastly amusing.

He is an intensely annoying man, and all the more irksome because it is difficult not to forgive him his multiple annoyances.

He's a spy, Auntie, of course. I've never doubted that, from the moment I first saw his enigmatic advertisement calling for a secretary, her `tolerance, discretion and unflappability' essential. tolerance, discretion and unflappability' essential.

His bizarre interests, his studied anonymity, his secret funds (for Bruce, Brae and Bute makes no income at all that I have ever been able to discern, and yet my salary arrives with reassuring regularity) all attest to it. Most damning of all, though, is the fact that in all the tall tales he has told me, this flamboyant liar has studiously avoided alluding to any involvement in espionage.

And yet, I remain unsure who he is spying for. He does not seem like a man to side with our present enemy, nor for that matter with any Allied power. His interest in the War is detached, even ironical — grotesquely so, for a man living in modern London. 'Country after country, falling like dominoes,' he mused this morning from his leather armchair, as he leafed through the papers I had handed him. 'How will it end, I wonder? How will it end?' He sounded mildly interested at most, as if in the progress of some skirmish between rival tribes in Africa.

My tolerance and unflappability must have been in short supply that morning, for I replied rather acerbically, 'Do you mean to tell me you have no way of seeing the future, Doctor? Perhaps your friend Faust could help you.'

The Doctor turned a shocked expression on me, though still with that infuriating gleam. 'Skip to the end and spoil the surprise? That would be *cheating*.'

So saying, he turned his attention to his newspapers, and I to his correspondence. The Doctor receives letters from across Europe and the Empire' as well as the United States and Asia — some reporting on the progress of the War, some on other, quite unrelated matters — as well as occasional missives from such surprising luminaries as Dr Jung in Switzerland and Professor Einstein in America. Oddly, none of his correspondents use or seem to require a name, addressing their letters to 'The Doctor' at Bruce, Brae and Bute.

His post this morning included an eye-witness report of conditions in occupied Norway posted from Archangel in Russia, an account of a hoax involving false Siamese twins in Adelaide, and a matter-of-fact note in an elderly hand about anomalous bee migration patterns on the South Downs. I sorted them into piles based on their urgency and how interesting I expected the Doctor to find them, keeping half an eye on him as he perused the news. He lingered, as I thought he might, over a supposed ghost sighting in Hornchurch — stories of any kind of supernatural or magical occurrence always fascinate him, and he laps up tales of spooks and spectres like a little boy — and then he came to the report I'd been concerned about. He frowned, read it swiftly, then went back and looked it through carefully, line by line.

He turned and caught me staring at him. I blushed, and pretended to be absorbed in a letter from the secretary of the British Interplanetary Society.

'Miss Weston,' the Doctor asked in befuddlement, 'who are "Laurel and Hardy"?'

I searched his face for any sign of a joke, but for once he appeared deadly serious. He'd shown such inexplicable gaps in his knowledge before, though, whether they were real or affected. Again, I sighed. 'They're film actors. Comedians. Clowns, I suppose. But that isn't what's interesting about the story, is it?'

'Unless robbery is a standard part of their comedy routine, then no,' the Doctor agreed.

'*Successful* robbery wouldn't be,' I said. 'If it were a film, they'd shoot each other in the foot, set the loot on fire and then get stuck trying to escape out of the same window together.'

This robbery, on the contrary, had been rather successful. Two men had broken into the Bloomsbury home of Sir Jacob Pearson, a Member of Parliament and noted antiquities collector, and abstracted certain items of worth from the glass cabinets in his study. Sir Jacob was away on a visit to his constituency, but his live-in housekeeper and her daughter described the intruders as wearing bowler hats, wing-collar shirts and ill-fitting jackets; one had been moustached and portly, the other slight and rumpled-looking. The woman and girl had each sworn independently that they were the very images of the film duo, although Mr Laurel and Mr Hardy's agents, when approached, had confirmed that both actors were in Hollywood as usual.

But the Doctor had found significance elsewhere. 'A silver bowl,' he read from the description of the stolen items, 'and a medallion depicting an unknown figure. "Part of the former Tumulty Collection, they hail from the same archaeological site in the Holy Land, dated to the first century, and are thought to have originally been of ceremonial use." Good heavens. We must go at once,' he decided.

'Very well, Doctor,' I replied, assuming that I had misheard. 'I have some filing to finish when I'm done with the letters, and you can dictate any replies when you're back.'

'Nonsense,' he declared robustly. 'I've been aware for a while that I should make greater use of your talents, Miss Weston. They are quite wasted in administrative support. Come, let us call at Sir Jacob Pearson's establishment and see what we might discover.'

'Dressed like that? I asked, incredulously, and trying not to wonder what talents he had in mind. Why not?' he cried. Why not, indeed? The iron is hot, and we must move swiftly if we hope to strike it before it cools. Come on, it's only a short walk.'

'But...' I began, and gave up immediately. We were not police, or even private investigators; we would be refused admission, and possibly even come under suspicion ourselves; I had not the first idea why the Doctor would even care about the theft of a few ancient relics. Yet nothing in my acquaintance with my employer had suggested that he was a man open to persuasion, on any matter or any grounds whatsoever. 'I'll get my coat,' I sighed, and did so.

* * *

Sir Jacob Pearson lived in a tall Georgian terraced townhouse. Though he had cut short his trip to the country, his train was yet to arrive in London, so it was his housekeeper, Mrs Grove, who received us. The Doctor, still in his cape, boots and jerkin, doffed his huge, floppy hat and proceeded to dazzle her with charm, contriving without saying anything specific to give her the impression that he was some kind of Parliamentary official, required by protocol to dress in this antiquated manner, and that her employer had asked him as a personal favour to look into the matter of the theft.

Mesmerised by this apparition, the poor woman gave us unfettered access to Pearson's study, then vanished willingly into the kitchen to make us tea.

'It's just as I feared,' the Doctor observed, quickly turning his attention to the shattered display cabinet in which the stolen artifacts, among others, had been kept. It was one of several in the room, and the rest remained untouched.

'The burglars knew exactly what they were looking for. If it were mere value they were after, there are more saleable objects in this case alone. See,' he said, indicating a rather battered golden chalice, 'here's the Wycombe Grail. I've seen it at meetings of the Hellfire Club. That alone has to be worth a small fortune.'

'Do you think a rival collector sent those men?' I asked.

'In a way, yes. It must have been a very particular collector, though. Someone with quite a specific reason to seek these particular items. And not, I fear, an idle or a harmless one.'

'You're talking about fear a lot, Doctor,' I pointed out. 'Are these artifacts *dangerous*?'

'In the wrong hands, undoubtedly,' he said. '*The Times* said that they were of ceremonial use, and it was quite correct. But what kind of ceremony, Miss Weston, and aimed at what purpose?'

I said, 'Well, who can guess at that, so long after they were buried?'

He stared at me for a moment, as if assessing me, and said, 'Someone who had seen such a rite performed in the past. In first-century Samaria, for instance.' Again, I saw no sign of mockery in his eyes.

As I tried to form a response to this, the housekeeper bustled in with the tea, and the Doctor was once again all geniality and good humour.

'Was it the breaking of the glass that roused you in the night, Mrs Grove?' he asked her, sympathetically.

'Well, yes and no, your honour,' said the stout cockney woman. 'It *was* the sound of glass what woke us, but not this case. They come in through the window in the downstairs... facilities, if you take my meaning. It woke my Daisy, so she wakes me up and says, "There's someone in the house, Ma." so we crept down the stairs, and it was then we hear the display-case being smashed. And then, who should come out this room but those men from the pictures, Laurel and Hardy, looking just like they did in *Saps at Sea*. Did you ever see that picture? Daisy and I seen it just the other week. Who'd have thought they'd turn out to be a pair of filthy tea-leaves? But that's America for you, I suppose. They says everyone's a gangster there.'

'I have no doubt they are correct,' said the Doctor gravely. 'The last time I was there I encountered considerable difficulties with a Sioux raiding party.'

The housekeeper showed us the broken window in the W.C., which the Doctor inspected carefully. 'A crude job,' he said. 'Effective enough, but lacking in finesse. A professional could have crowbarred the window and made a quieter, safer entrance.'

At his request, Mrs Grove let us out through the back door, and my employer confirmed that there was no sign from the outside that any more sophisticated entry had been attempted. Two sets of footsteps in the muddy ground showed where the malefactors had stood to climb through. The Doctor followed them to a flowerbed.

'That's odd,' he said, glancing towards the back of the garden, where a low fence gave access to an alley. 'They climbed over from the garden next door. Why would they do that, when they could easily have got in directly?'

'Maybe they had the wrong house the first time,' I suggested. took, the next-door window's been smashed as well.'

'I was thinking the very same thing,' the Doctor claimed. 'Who lives there, Mrs Grove?'

'It's been stood empty,' she said. 'Old Mr Morroway died just when the War was beginning, and both his sons is army officers. Nobody's got the time to see to it. The family lets me have a key, though, in case it's needed.'

The Doctor said grimly, 'I think it is now. Tell me, is there any connection between that house and this one? A way of passing between them, I mean?'

She looked thoughtful. Well, now you mentions it... there's this crawlspace goes along underneath the eaves, what you used to be able to get into from all the attics along the terrace. Most of the owners have theirs blocked up, but old Mr Morroway never did, nor Sir Jacob neither. I told him, I did, ever so many times, "You ought to at least get a lock put on that attic door, sir, anyone could get in." But he always said it was a needless expense. He's a stubborn man, Sir Jacob — no disrespect meant, your honour — and he knows his own mind, so he does.'

'No doubt,' the Doctor said, apparently forgetting that he was supposed to be the M.P.'s close personal friend. 'Miss Weston and I will need access to the Morroway house. Would you lend us your key, Mrs Grove?'

I was growing uneasy now. It seemed the Doctor had gone beyond Baron Munchhausen and was now intent on taking on the part of Hercule Poirot or Lord Peter Wimsey, a role that I feared could quickly get us into grave trouble. For her part, though, the housekeeper turned out to need very little persuasion, especially when the Doctor made mention of compensating her for her inconvenience. Soon the two of us were inside the empty dwelling, its dustsheet-shrouded furniture deadening our voices and our steps.

The Doctor quickly found a trail of footprints leading from the broken window, which in this house was part of the original pantry, and through the kitchen to the hallway. He led the way at a gallop up several flights of stairs to the top floor, where a ladder had been abandoned against the hatch of the attic.

The Doctor examined it carefully. 'This was set down in the mud outside,' he said. 'I assume it was while they broke the window. The mud is along one side, rather than on the feet, so they didn't use it to climb in They always intended to approach via the attic.'

'Did they find the passage blocked after all?' I wondered. But a short and grimy excursion enabled us to pass without obstruction back into the Pearson house, where we descended Sir Jacob's stairs to find a startled Mrs Grove sitting in the kitchen with her daughter, Daisy. A glazier had arrived to mend the window, and we could hear him in the W.C., whistling 'Colonel Bogey' to himself as he worked.

The Doctor said, 'Your Laurel and Hardy came well prepared, and with a plan. They forced their way into the empty house, where nobody would hear them, and brought a ladder so they could reach this one through the crawlspace. Presumably they intended to creep downstairs, abstract the items they needed, and return the way they came without raising the alarm. Then, for some reason, they abandoned this attempt along with their ladder, broke into this house directly, and stole the items they needed with little attempt at stealth. Does that strike anybody else as odd?'

I assumed that he was being rhetorical, but I replied, 'It sounds like something in the attic alarmed them. Perhaps they saw a rat?' It scarcely seemed an adequate explanation, even to me.

My employer said, Did you observe the pattern of the dust around the hatchway?'

I had not, having been rather too preoccupied by observing the dust smearing itself across my good work clothes. Blithely he continued, 'There was a wide oval of clear floor

just by the door to the crawlspace, as if someone had sprawled in the dust there. Someone fat.'

'Hardy, then,' I said. Did Mr Hardy seem dirtier than his colleague, Mrs Grove?' he asked.

'It was too dark for us to see that, your grace,' Daisy Grove answered, apparently even more awed by the Doctor's courtly apparel than her mother, despite its soiled state. For myself, I could only hope that I would be able to get the stains out. Even on my salary, I could ill afford another outfit.

'And how did they behave?' he asked. When they saw you, for instance, were they alarmed?'

'Oh, not at all, sir, very cool they was,' said Mrs Grove. 'Not like in the pictures.'

I had a sudden image of the two men running bandy-legged away, Oliver Hardy grabbing at his bowler to keep it on while Stan Laurel gibbered in terror. I fought the urge to giggle.

'It was like they didn't hardly notice us,' said Daisy.

'Oh, they seen us all right,' Mrs Grove said firmly.

'They *seen* us, Ma, but they didn't act like it bothered them. Just looked at us and carried on what they was doing. Walked to the window calm as you please and climbed out. I watched them do it while Ma called the police,' she told us.

'Interesting,' the Doctor said. 'I'll take a further look inside the attic, if I may, and then we shall trouble you ladies no more.'

To my relief, this time he did not insist that I accompany him, and I stood at the bottom of Sir Jacob's own latter, listening to his grunts and occasional cries of 'Alla!' When he descended again, looking grubbier than ever, his only comment was 'The eaves are leaded. I thought as much.'

The Doctor thanked mother and daughter profusely, and with somewhat excessive ceremony, and we returned to the offices of Bruce, Brae and Bute, where the Doctor vanished upstairs once more, I hoped with the intention of changing his clothing.

I did the best I could with my skirt and blouse in the washroom, and emerged to find the Doctor looking clean and fresh, wearing a double-breasted suit whose cut was sober, even old-fashioned, but whose vibrant shade of blue would have alarmed a kingfisher. He was holding a device no bigger than a wristwatch, which, when he demonstrated its use to me, turned out to be a miniature radio receiver.

I said, 'Good heavens. I didn't think they could be made that small.'

'Oh, it's easy enough with the right components,' he replied, rather too glibly. 'As it happens this one's also rather good at searching out a particular kind of signal. One that sounds like this.'

He flicked some switches and the machine started to pulse irregularly, emitting an arhythmic knocking that began to repeat itself after perhaps twelve seconds.

'And what is that?' I asked.

'A language I learned a long time ago. One that very few people know. It's an instruction, of a rather specific sort. In Samaria they used the Hebrew alphabet and the written word, but technology marches on.'

'An instruction to what?' I wondered, but the Doctor frowned fiercely and gave no reply. Who's sending it?' I imagined a German agent holed up in a garret somewhere in London, picking up this message from his handlers and going out to commit whatever atrocities they saw fit to specify.

I tried a third question. 'Can we stop it?'

'Before we can consider any such thing,' my employer replied, 'I need to locate its origin. Fortunately, another thing this gadget happens to be good at is triangulation. Miss Weston, I'm afraid your filing will have to wait. I have a task for you.'

I said, 'You know I can't possibly operate that thing.'

He stared at me in surprise. No, I didn't suppose you could. I fear it's rather beyond...' He paused.

'A woman?' I suggested acidly.

The Doctor flushed a little. 'I meant no slight, I promise you. As I said earlier, I have the greatest respect for your abilities, and I mean to put them to work. The items that were stolen were part of the Tumulty Collection, which as I recall was broken up and sold at auction in June of last year. I would like you, if you can, to find out who the buyers were for the other items, and whether there has been any attempt to steal them also. That seems to me an admirable use of your talents.'

'I suppose so,' I agreed, somewhat mollified.

'And then you may take the rest of the afternoon off,' he told me. 'Go home and refresh yourself. Meet me back here at six.'

I pursed my lips. 'At six?' The Doctor had never expected me to work after office hours before. 'Whatever for?'

'We have some further investigation to do,' the Doctor told me, 'if I am to complete my observations. I believe your contract specifies a favourable rate for overtime, when it is required. I shall see you at six o'clock, Miss Weston.'

And so saying, he disappeared into the streets of London.

* * *

When he returned, I was ready and waiting. While back at Mrs Evans', as well as bathing and changing — and writing my letter to you, Auntie — I'd had time to look over my contract. The Doctor had not lied about the overtime provision, which was very generous indeed. At least, I thought, I'd be able to have my work skirt properly cleaned.

When he arrived, however, I was surprised to see that the Doctor was carrying a rather elegant evening-dress, in a tasteful midnight blue. For a moment I wondered whether this was an addition to his wardrobe upstairs, but it was obvious that it was closer to my size.

He put it down, embarrassed, and brandished his miniature radio-receiver above his head as if he had just entered with his usual panache. 'I have them!' he exclaimed. 'This little wonder has pinned the source of the signal down to one particular building — and we are in luck.'

He tossed a card onto the desk — cream-coloured, gold-embossed and, I thought, distastefully flashy. I picked it up and read:

YOU ARE INVITED
TO THE GRAND OPENING OF

SIMONY'S HOUSE OF LIKENESSES

WE REPLICATE THE RICH AND FACSIMILISE THE FAMOUS!

MORE FAMILIAR FACES THAN A CLOCK SHOP! ALL RESEMBLANCES GUARANTEED UNCANNY!

It gave an address, a time and today's date.

Doubtfully, I said, 'I suppose it's some kind of waxworks attraction. Something like Madame Tussaud's, with figures of politicians and celebrities.'

'The principle appears the same,' the Doctor confirmed, 'although I doubt whether there is any wax involved. It seems that they have sent out these invitations to most of the famous people in the city — those who have had the honour to be thus imitated, I assume.'

I said, Did they send one to you, then?'

He laughed uproariously. 'Oh, hardly, Miss Weston. As you know, I take immense care to maintain a low profile. No, I persuaded Daisy Grove to borrow Sir Jacob Pearson's for me. It doesn't strike me as the kind of event that would interest him. But tell me, what have you learned of the Tumulty Collection?'

'Oh,' I said. 'You were right, of course. Two other items have gone missing over the past week. An incense-burner and a ceramic urn, both from the same excavation as the others. One had been bought by an obscure museum, the other was in a private collection, both here in London. Both were stolen during break-ins.'

The Doctor smiled. 'And were the intruders seen?'

I said, 'One of them was. The museum guard hadn't told the police because he was afraid of sounding ridiculous, but I was able to ask him the right questions when I phoned. He told me that the thief was the spitting image of Noel Coward. An actor and playwright,' I added, just in case.

'I believe I've heard the name,' the Doctor mused. 'Not a man renowned for his larcenous proclivities, I take it, nor his interest in antiques?'

I didn't feel that this required an answer. Instead I said, 'Lead is opaque to radio waves, isn't it?' I had had time to think about this during my bath. Lead, though a rather common roofing material in older houses, is unusual in this respect, as I had happened to recall from my school science lessons. 'That's why you were so interested in the leading under the eaves.'

He beamed angelically. 'My respect for your incisiveness, Miss Weston, grows apace.'

I said, 'But that doesn't make any sense. The burglars wouldn't have been in the crawlspace for more than a few minutes. What would it matter that they were out of radio contact for that time? Any fool could climb up and crawl along into the next house without instructions. Even the real Laurel and Hardy would have trouble making a mess of that.'

'Ah, but they were not the real Laurel and Hardy,' the Doctor told me. `Of that we can, I think, be fairly certain.'

'Of course,' I sighed. 'But surely you're not suggesting that...' I trailed off. I thought I knew what the Doctor was suggesting, but the idea seemed altogether too absurd to put into words.

'My suspicions can wait,' the Doctor told me. 'For now, we have a grand opening to attend. I, er, hope this fits,' he added, diffidently indicating the dress. 'I had to guess your size. I thought it might be some compensation for... well, I noticed your clothes were in a bit of a state earlier, so...'

'I can't possibly accept such a gift from an employer,' I told him. The dress was beautiful, elegantly cut and such a deep shade of blue. 'It would be wholly inappropriate.'

His face fell. 'Ah yes,' he said. 'Cultural mores. I hadn't thought...'

Before he could withdraw the offer, I added, `If you require me to wear it in the course of my duties, though, it would be quite acceptable for me to keep it on the premises. It would remain your property, of course.'

'Well, naturally,' the Doctor agreed, bewildered. 'I'm sure that that will make all the difference. Now, since you have reconciled yourself to it, perhaps you might put it on, so that we may be going?'

He hadn't thought to buy any matching shoes, of course. I had to wear the splendid dress with my sensible work-shoes, and hope that nobody Would notice the disparity. There was certainly no likelihood that the Doctor would.

* * *

The sky was darkening as our cab approached Simony's House of Likenesses, and I did not look forward to making my way home again later. I knew that, while the rest of us Londoners struggled with pitch-black streets and candlelit rooms, the upper echelons of society had continued to party in bright light behind their thoroughly blacked-out windows, but I had not expected to be invited to such a gathering.

Not that either of us *had* been invited, of course, but the Doctor was not in the least embarrassed by this. He presented Sir Jacob's invitation at the door with all the aplomb and bonhomie he had brought to his conversation with Mrs Grove, and we were admitted at once. The House of Likenesses was an Art Deco building, built perhaps twenty years ago as a theatre or a dancehall, but converted to its new purpose as a viewing floor for Simon's exhibition of models.

The first thing I saw as we entered was two young women, identical but for their glamorous outfits, both of whom I recognised immediately as Vera Lynn — but only one of them was alive, smiling charmingly at a photographer while she draped her arm around the shoulder of her inert, but disconcertingly identical, double. Nearby, a man was laughing as he inspected his own duplicate. I identified him for the Doctor as Ivor Novello.

Everywhere there were actors, entertainers, politicians, royalty and nobility. Perhaps a third of them were real, and most of these had his or her likeness among the statues on the plinths. Not all the originals were present) of d course: there were copies of Presidents Roosevelt and Hoover, and Stalin and some other foreign leaders; film stars from Ann Sheridan to Zeppo Marx; and soldiers including Field Marshal Ironside and General Montgomery. The King and Prime Minister were absent in person as well, although I saw Mr Eden there, and Mr Chamberlain, and a Duchess of Kent who I was almost sure was real.

There was even an area, corresponding to the theatre's stage and closed off by what were very likely its original curtains, which had been designated as a chamber of horrors, where one could go to see the likenesses of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and a host of senior Germans — Himmler, Goebbels, Rommel and their beastly ilk — corralled away from those of decent people. Aside from their eerie immobility, these were as lifelike as the rest, and I shuddered as I compared this static Fuehrer with the ranting, furious figure whom I had seen in the newsreels.

'Realistic, aren't they?' the Doctor observed at my side.

'They could be the very people,' I agreed with a shudder. 'How ever do they do it?'

'Not through any technique Madame Tussaud's could replicate, I imagine,' he said, guiding me back through the curtains. 'Ah, I recognise these gentlemen.' He steered me towards the Laurel and Hardy duplicates, each its original to the life. The big one was frozen in the act of twiddling his tie, the skinny one scratching his tousled head. 'I found a magazine at Mr Fine's with their photograph in it.' He peered with interest at Hardy's jacket. 'This a rather good fit, don't you think?'

'I suppose the owners must have a bulk account with a tailor,' I said. `These customers would stay still while he measured them, at least.' The Doctor was looking expectantly at me, and I realised his point. 'But Oliver Hardy wears an ill-fitting jacket. His is too tight, Laurel's is too large. They do it to emphasise the difference in size. Mrs Grove even remarked on it.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Someone has replaced the jacket with another. It would have been covered with grime from the attic floor. Some shabbiness might be in character, but real dirt wouldn't be acceptable.'

I said, 'But, Doctor... these are *waxworks*. Or something similar whatever they're made of. They're not *alive*. They're certainly not going to break out of the exhibition at night and go stealing relics from houses and museums.'

I shuddered again as I said it, though. The invitation card had been quite right when it guaranteed uncanny resemblances. Immobile images of the living are always unnerving; they remind us so much of the dead. For a moment I allowed myself to remember my fiancé Jack, taken so suddenly along with all his shipmates by a German torpedo in the earliest days of the war... but then I chided myself severely. This was no time to give in to sentiment. There was someone relying upon me.

For his own part, the Doctor needed no pause for reflection. He had already disappeared off into the distance, and shortly I heard him cry 'Aha!'

Wearily I followed him, and found him staring at an empty plinth, the only such we had seen since arriving.

'George Formby,' he read from the plaque set into its base. 'A musician and entertainer, apparently. So, where is he?'

'Cleaning windows, I suppose,' I replied, but the Doctor was oblivious to my sarcasm.

He said, 'I'll tell you another thing I've noticed, Miss Weston. There aren't any historical characters here. No Shakespeare, no Napoleon, no Queen Victoria. Every figure is a replica of somebody alive today.'

'But of course,' said a silken voice behind us. 'Who can tell whether the dead resemble their portraits and photographs? Even in the late Queen's case, a forty-year-old memory might cheat. For those who live, one has the evidence of one's own eyes. Sincere imitation is essential to the art.'

The Doctor had stiffened, his face set in dismay, his hackles rising almost visibly as he turned. I'd not have been surprised if he'd bared his teeth. He said, his voice an ominous low rumble, 'Mr Simony, I presume.'

The owner of the House of Likenesses was surprisingly young, his face smooth, handsome and, but for the amused quirk of an eyebrow, disturbingly symmetrical. Dark of hair and skin, he was obviously foreign, but with a generic kind of foreignness that could have originated anywhere from Italy to India. It left no trace in his accent. He wore a white suit, quite inappropriate to the occasion, and on each arm hung a young and attractive fair-haired woman. They were dressed alike and were in every way identical — twins, I

supposed, engaged for the occasion to emphasise the theme of duplication that surrounded us everywhere.

'Indeed,' Mr Simony agreed urbanely, 'although my friends call me "Magus". A nickname merely; more of an affectation, in fact.' He inhaled deeply from the cigarette he carried in a holder. 'And you, I'm led to believe, are the enigmatic Dr... Bute, is it? Or was it Dr Brae? Or perhaps even Dr Bruce?'

The Doctor's eyes widened, but Simony did not give him a chance to speak. To me, he said, 'So *you* must be the efficient Miss Joan Weston. You're highly spoken of, in certain circles. I'm sorry Mr Formby can't be here to greet you both. One of the removal men stood on his ukulele as he was being installed, and we haven't been able to procure a replacement. The poor fellow looks so bereft without it that I decided not to display him tonight. The original is about the place somewhere with his wife, I believe, but of course he is not so easily fixed to a plinth.'

'Of course,' I said, rather vapidly. This 'Magus' had strange and fascinating eyes, the same deep dark colour as my dress, that drew in one's attention against one's will. In contemplating them I felt as if I was left with little space in my mind for conversation.

The Doctor hissed at Simony, '*What* are you doing here? What do you *imagine* this charade will accomplish?'

The Magus smiled mockingly, and I found myself smirking in sympathy. The Doctor could be pompous and absurd at times, with his tales of Faust and the Hellfire Club and first-century Samaria. Simony said, 'Charade, Doctor? I think "tableau" might be a better term. As for accomplishment, my one devout wish is that all those who my likenesses imitate should enjoy themselves immensely.' He waved a hand to indicate the room, and I laughed happily.

'Nonsense,' the Doctor growled. 'You always have some ulterior aim in mind.'

Mr Simony smiled and nodded. 'As ever, I serve the Unity. Our goals are complementary, Doctor.'

'Opposite, you mean,' the Doctor spat.

'At times in the past, perhaps they have been,' the Magus agreed pleasantly. 'In this place, now? As you say, my role is to accomplish. Yours, as I understand it, is to observe. Neither is sufficient by itself, yet both are necessary. There is nothing paradoxical in that.'

This struck me as extremely witty, and I laughed again. The Doctor glared furiously at me, then his expression softened to concern. He took my arm and curtly told Simony, 'Excuse us for a moment.'

The Magus bowed, but I said, 'I don't want to go anywhere,' and pulled my arm away petulantly. `You can't make me.'

'You're in my pay, Miss Weston, and you're wearing my dress,' snapped the Doctor. 'You shall most certainly do as you are told.'

His blunt discourtesy was like iced water in my face. I gaped at him in outrage, then dismay as I realised how I had been behaving. In desperate confusion, I allowed him to draw me away.

Next to the empty plinth, Mr Simony called lightly after us, 'You are an observer, aren't you, Doctor? Well, you have my full permission to observe.'

* * *

'That awful man!' I fumed, tucked away with the Doctor in a corner between facsimiles of Edith Piaf and Stanley Matthews. 'That vile, beastly man. He *enchanted* me! He had me *fascinated*! He turned me into a giggling idiot of a schoolgirl!'

'It's a talent he has,' the Doctor agreed sombrely. 'A charismatic personality is useful to him. It helps him to accomplish, as he puts it. Miss Weston, I apologise for bringing you here. I realised that someone must be planning to revive the Rite of Dynamis Megale, but if I'd known it was him again, after all this time...'

I snapped at him, 'As if you're any better! With your twinkling eyes and your charm and your ridiculous lies! You flatter me and compliment me and buy me dresses, and then in a crisis I'm just an employee to you, someone who owes you the clothes off her back!'

'Miss Weston... Joan.' The Doctor looked genuinely pained. 'I promise you, you are far more than that to me. I had to shock you in order to break the Magus' thrall. I could have slapped you, but that would have drawn unwelcome attention, and would probably have hurt you no less.' He gazed cautiously at me. 'Perhaps I was wrong about that. But please believe me, Miss Weston, I value your company and your respect far more highly than your dress or your salary. Or, come to that, your overtime,' he added delicately.

I took several deep breaths. 'I understand, yes.' I added grudgingly, 'I should thank you — I suppose. Doctor...'

He looked cautious. 'Yes?'

'May I slap *you*?'

He nodded gravely. 'Later, perhaps. The Magus slipped out shortly after speaking with us. I want to see who he's talking to now. Perhaps a friend of his saw something interesting while he was cleaning windows.'

* * *

Checking first that we were unobserved, the Doctor led me to the curtained doorway through which he had seen the Magus vanish, and down a darkened passageway towards what must once have been the theatre's green room. As we approached the door standing ajar at the end, he gestured to me to stop and wait in silence in the shadow of some stairs leading to an upper floor.

From inside the room, Mr Simony's smooth voice said, 'You have the final item?'

Another man's voice said, 'I have it, Magus.' Though a passionless monotone, it came with a distinctive Lancashire twang that I had heard a hundred times singing about Chinese laundries and little sticks of Blackpool rock.

'And were you seen?' The Magus' tones were as insinuating as ever, and I found myself unwillingly attracted once more. This time I recognised his magnetism for the cheap trick it was, and rejected it fiercely.

'A cleaning woman saw me,' said the other voice. No-one else.'

'I imagine she was too surprised to raise the alarm.' Simony chuckled. `Nor is she likely to be believed, at first anyway. Well, child, give me the object.'

The nasal monotone came again. 'It's here, Magus.'

I heard Simony's intake of breath. 'At last. The Athame of Getta, just as I remember it. You've done well, child.'

'Yes, Magus.'

'You will be rewarded,' the Magus said. 'Your original is here tonight Because of what you have done, you shall cease this slavish half-life. By sunrise, you shall *live*.'

'Yes, Magus.' There was no change in the duplicate's tone.

'Remain here for now,' Simony said, and I felt the Doctor's hand on my arm, drawing me further into the shadows. 'I will return.'

'Yes, Magus,' said the other voice again, but Simony paid it no heed. He swept out of the room and proceeded apace back down the corridor to the exhibition hall, his blonde twins silently in train. They moved with an eerie grace, and as I watched I realised that they were walking in perfect time with one another.

When we were sure that they had gone, the Doctor gestured to me to stay quiet. We crept to the door and peered through. Sure enough, standing in the room was a motionless effigy of George Formby, his hair slicked back, his suit and tie neatly pressed, his mouth set in a broad and toothy, but horribly vacant, grin.

Next to the figure, on an ordinary Formica-topped folding table, sat the relics the duplicates had stolen. The silver medallion and bowl from Sir Jacob Pearson's collection had been buffed and polished till they gleamed. Next to them stood an incense-burner, already loaded with some concoction that smelt sweet and vile, and an ordinary-looking urn of dull clay, its mouth dark and ragged. In pride of place lay a silver dagger with a handle made from what looked like bone. I did not care to think what creature it might once have belonged to.

While I stared at the blade in grim fascination, the Doctor had been examining the Formby replica. Its eyes followed him, but it made no move and showed no other reaction at all. Finally he said, 'I think it won't respond to us unless its orders tell it to.'

'But Simony told him he would live,' I said. What exactly does this ceremony do? You called it the Ritual...'

'The Rite of Dynamis Megale.' The Doctor's face was stony. 'It was a ritual of animation, involving a medallion, a silver bowl, an urn, a censer and a ceremonial knife. I'll spare you the details; it was also an obscenity. Any mage who knows the right words may cause a clay figure to walk and speak, and making them resemble living people is merely a matter of skill. But only a master of Dynamis Megale can give that likeness the character, the spirit, the very life of the real person. Of course, for that to happen, the original must be deprived of that same life.'

I shuddered. 'Does he really intend to do that to everybody here?'

'All those with a counterpart, yes. Their wives and other guests will be distracted while they're taken aside one by one and... processed.'

I said, 'And all these duplicates will be under the Magus' control, I assume.'

His voice was low. 'Oh yes. The life of the original is transferred, but not the will. That remains the Magus' own.'

'And once he has replaced those here...' I thought the matter through with growing dismay. With Eden and Chamberlain, he could lure the Prime Minister into the same trap tomorrow. With him, the King. There's even an Archbishop of Canterbury figure! And...' I stopped, suddenly awed by the scale of Simony's ambition. 'He must have plans for German High Command as well.'

`America and Russia, too,' the Doctor said mildly. I even saw Chairman Chiang Kai-shek out there. If he's allowed to carry out his plan, the Magus — or the authority he works for — will end up in control of the Earth

'What can we do?' I asked. The idea of not intervening was no longer thinkable; it would be the worst betrayal of my country, of dear Jack's memory — not to mention of you,

Auntie — to see such an outrage in the making and not act to prevent it. 'Can we contact the police? Or should we talk to Mr Eden?'

'I doubt we could persuade either in good time,' the Doctor said. 'And now the Magus has the last piece of his puzzle, I imagine he intends to begin at once. No, we must take these relics and get them to a place of safety. Without them, all he has is a roomful of ventriloquists' dummies.'

'Dummies he can use to commit crimes for him,' I reminded him.

'Indeed,' the Doctor agreed. 'But let's address the larger danger first.' Looking around, he saw a discarded haversack on the floor. He seized it, and stuffed it with the bowl and medallion. After a struggle, he managed to fit the censer in as well, but the urn was obviously too large. 'Would you mind carrying this, Miss Weston?' he asked.

'Can't we just smash it?' I asked, suddenly excited. 'If he needs it for the ceremony, then —'

'Nothing we have here will break it,' the Doctor said. 'If I can get it back to the office, I have equipment that may succeed. But this was made by no earthly potter.' I shivered at the sincerity in his tone. 'I'll take the bag you carry the urn.'

He opened a second exit from the green room, revealing another, shorter, corridor leading to what had evidently been a stage door. 'That should take us out onto the street,' he said. 'I'll join you in a moment.'

'What about the knife?' I asked.

'I'm afraid our friend may take an interest in that.' The Doctor reached out cautiously for the athame, keeping his gaze on the Formby duplicate. Its eyes followed his hand. 'His recent orders were, after all, to bring it to the Magus. He may react now if we try to remove it from his master's keeping.'

'Then leave it here,' I urged him. 'If Simony needs all the relics, then surely he won't be able to use the knife alone?'

'You make an excellent point, Miss Weston,' the Doctor said. 'But actually, this fellow's given me a better idea.'

At once he grasped the knife, and George Formby's immobile figure jerked. The Lancashire voice intoned, 'That belongs to the Magus,' and it lunged for the Doctor.

'Back the way we came,' the Doctor suggested, and I rushed to obey him.

* * *

Out in the hall of replicas, our path was impeded by the crowd, who the Doctor was forced to jostle aside with brusque 'Excuse me, madam's and 'Thank you, sir's. Behind us, the ersatz Formby showed less compunction, thrusting people out of its path with a shocking strength and to rising protests.

I had supposed that the Doctor would head directly for the exit, but instead he made for the area where the Laurel and Hardy images stood on their plinth, frozen in mid-routine. As we bustled through the room, he had pulled out the stolen bowl from of his bag again, and now he waved it at them, crying, 'Recognise this, lads?'

In unison, and in the same eerily unfeeling reproductions of their originals' voices, the duplicates said, 'That belongs to the Magus.' Both lurched from their stands, to the shock and alarm of the nearest guests, and stumbled after us.

'Have you seen Noël Coward anywhere?' the Doctor asked me urgently, and I gestured feebly towards an immobile figure in a lounge-suit. The Doctor exchanged the

bowl for the censer and brandished it at the figure, who sure enough removed his cigarette-holder to drawl, 'That belongs to the Magus.'

Meanwhile, the urn in my hands had attracted the attention of another likeness — that of Gracie Fields, whose Rochdale trill now echoed the same dull words. Since no other figures had reacted, I supposed that she must have been the one who stole the urn.

At first, once they had overcome their initial surprise, the assembled company were entertained at the sight of Laurel, Hardy and Formby on our trail, assuming that these performers, or their near doubles, had been recruited by the management as part of an elaborate practical joke. Now, though, as the, Coward and Fields facsimiles joined them and the likenesses continued to shove all obstacles aside, guests and their inert replicas alike, they were becoming frightened. In the midst of their vocal dismay I distinctly heard the real George Formby cry, 'Ee, that fella's gonna give me a right bad name!'

As the panic spread, and some of the braver guests tried to bar the duplicates' path, the Doctor and I reached the doors. The doorman thrust out a hand to keep us from leaving, but the Doctor wielded his heavy haversack as a makeshift cosh and the man went down at once. At least *he* seemed to be human, I thought.

As we finally left the House of Likenesses, the Doctor started to run in earnest. He does not have the appearance of an athletic man, but I learned that when necessary he could muster a remarkable turn of speed. For my part I was grateful now that I had kept my work shoes, rather than changing into something more impractical.

The blackout had begun while we were inside, and now we hurtled together through the darkened streets, the uproar from the House of Likenesses subsiding behind us. I thought I heard a policeman's whistle from the same direction, but it receded too quickly to be sure.

At the Doctor's insistence, we made for the offices of Bruce, Brae and Bute, where he supposedly had the wherewithal to destroy the relics. Behind us, I could hear the following footsteps of the five likenesses, the light skip of Laurel and the heavy tread of Hardy standing out from the rest. After a few moments, I heard them joined by other steps, a group of them, moving in a single steady mindless rhythm.

'He's sent more of those things after us!' I gasped.

The Doctor stopped for a moment to peer back around a corner, and after a moment's hesitation I followed suit. As luck would have it, the clouds above us cleared for a moment and the moon shone through — enough for us to make out, despite the gloom, the figures of our pursuers.

The five assorted shapes that had been following us were now part of a larger group. Their numbers had been swelled by a squad of other likenesses, all wearing peaked caps and marching with the crisp tread of military jackboots.

'They were curtained off from the others,' the Doctor noted sombrely. 'Their sudden absence would be less remarked upon.' At once he was running once more, as if the legions of Hell itself were after us — which, for all I knew of the Magus' origins, could actually be the case.

And so we began a nightmare journey through the streets of the blacked-out capital, pursued by Nazi doppelgangers and a handful of showbusiness personalities. I lost track of our route, following the Doctor as he took sharp turns and side-streets and back-alleys without a moment's pause, guided — or so I could only hope — by some homing-pigeon instinct. I kept desperate hold of the urn throughout, though it had no convenient handles to grasp it by, and its smooth curves kept threatening to escape my clammy hands.

In my memory, this part of the evening is a series of flickering glimpses as I glanced back at those horrific figures, illuminated by the moon's occasional pale glow. Goebbels' ferrety visage, fixed immobile, framed against the dome of St Paul's. The self-satisfied set of Himmler's weak jaw as he rounded the portico of the British Museum. Most of all, I remember the staring eyes and bristling moustache of Hitler himself as he and his lieutenants marched past Nelson's column, the celebrity duplicates in train.

We met few other people in the blackout, and those we did took one glance at our pursuers before fleeing in terror and, presumably, considerable confusion.

Finally, after what seemed many hours of breathless, unthinking, headlong panic — such a stretch of time, in fact, that I began to expect the sunrise any moment, though in the light of hindsight it cannot have taken us more than half an hour — we arrived back at the dark doors of our office, and the Doctor fumbled out his key.

'Inside,' he instructed me, evidently just as out of breath as I.

'I don't think that will hold them, Doctor,' I gasped as he locked door after us. 'You saw how strong they are, and there are — what — twelve of them?' The windows would fare no better, I thought. The building is an old one, and they retain their original shutters, which I had closed before leaving as a general precaution against the blackout. Still, if the likenesses were as sturdy as they seemed, four of them could pick up a fifth and use it as a battering ram. Hardy's bulk would be best for that, I thought, and realised that I was in danger of succumbing to hysteria.

I took some deep breaths while the Doctor unlocked the inner door, beckoning me frantically. I followed him up the stairs to his upper sanctum - a threshold I had never yet been allowed to pass. Behind us, a pounding began from the door below.

The stairs were almost completely dark, and I stumbled when I reached the landing. The Doctor held my arm once more, to steady me, unlocking a further door and leading me into a room whose windows stood unshuttered to the dim sky. In the cloud-muffled moonlight I could barely see, but I realised with surprise and a rush of sadness that the apartment where the Doctor spent so much of his time was virtually bare. The only furniture was some kind of cabinet in the corner, whose details I could not make out.

'We're lucky we're only facing the likenesses in their cruder state,' the Doctor told me hastily, as he bustled over to the tall box and applied yet another key to its doors. Without the Rite of Dynamis Megale, they have no life of their own. What they have, they borrow from the words that sate them.'

'They seem to be managing fairly well to me,' I protested, as the pounding downstairs gave way to an ominous splintering sound.

The Doctor opened the cabinet, and to my surprise light flooded out — a warm light as of a great many lanterns or candles, dimmish in itself but bright enough to dazzle me after the inky darkness of the empty room. I glanced at the window in reflexive concern, before reminding myself that there was no raid in progress, and that our present danger was not from any Germans in the air.

The Doctor was inside the box now. 'Miss Weston, are you coming?' he boomed, his voice echoing strangely.

'Whatever do you mean?' I asked, a little crossly. I crossed nervously to the box and peered inside.

* * *

It took me a moment for my eyes to understand what I saw, and even then my mind was unable to make sense of it.

The cabinet opened up into... a secret entrance, I supposed, into another room, one that looked like a mad alchemist's workshop and that... well, could only, surely, be in the house next door... although the upstairs offices there belonged to a law firm; I had been inside and they looked nothing at all like this... so obviously the Doctor must have bought the building from them, and redecorated, though if so it was strange that Brenda Goode, who worked there, had said nothing to me about it on any of the occasions when we had met...

My head buzzed with confusion and near-panic, but then I heard the tramping of footsteps from below and I recalled that, for the moment, self-preservation was more urgent than comprehension. I darted though the door and heard it slam shut behind me — reacting, I thought by way of a straw to clutch at, perhaps to some hidden spring.

The room was huge — larger, I realised, than could possibly have fitted inside the law firm's offices, even if the next wall along had been knocked through as well, not to mention its ceiling and indeed its roof. Nor was it built from the same materials. Above a chessboard-flagstoned floor, marble pillars topped with arches surrounded columns of circular alcoves fronted with frosted glass, behind which lights glowed. Above our level was a second row of arches, then another; the lights dimmed as the room rose, so that I could not see how far the tiers ascended. Opposite the doors I had entered by, there stood an empty arch through which I could see the pale sky and shadowed skyline of London, though I was sure that the angle didn't match the point from which we were viewing it.

Though vast, the space was still absurdly cluttered, filled with chairs and chests and workbenches and tables and ornate stands, all of them overflowing with arcane equipment of many kinds. I could see globes and astrolabes and orreries; alembics and retorts and crucibles; idols and statuettes; skulls and phrenology models and even an articulated head made of brass; shelf upon shelf of leatherbound volumes; a rack of robes and vestments (though not, I noticed, any of the outfits I had seen the Doctor in); and an enviable collection of Tiffany lamps.

The Doctor stood next to a piece of wooden machinery, a wide box like a many-sided writing-desk that stood on its own sturdy pillar. It was encrusted with buttons and levers and surmounted by a tall pylon, around which a thick wooden rail spiralled outward like a vine.

'I'm aware that this may be disorientating for you, Miss Weston,' the Doctor told me. 'At present, I'm afraid we simply haven't the time.' He had taken his miniature radio receiver from his pocket, and as I watched he inserted it into a pigeonhole in the wooden structure and flicked a small switch. The intermittent knocking signal I had heard earlier filled the cavernous space.

I heard a fluttering, and a sleepy voice called a drawn-out, 'Who...?'

The Doctor lifted a curtain over something shaped like a bird-cage, which hung on a long chain that disappeared into the darkness above us, and peered inside. 'Hush,' he said impatiently. 'Go back to sleep. Useless creature,' he sighed, replacing the curtain and turning back to me. 'It's still on Wittenberg time.'

This was the least of the incomprehensible things I was currently grappling with, but the one point I did grasp was that the Doctor was absolutely right — we had more urgent matters to deal with. 'Whatever are we to do?' I asked him in a whisper, then jumped as our

pursuers resumed their own pounding, this time against the cabinet door behind me. I rushed across the room to his side, eliciting another irritable, 'Who?' from the birdcage.

'Nobody you know,' the Doctor told it. Gently, he took from me the ritual urn from Simony's House of Likenesses, which I was surprised to realise I was still clutching to my chest, and placed it on a nearby table, which he swept hurriedly clear. 'Put those out, too,' he told me, passing me the haversack full of the other things we had stolen.

Dazed and disoriented beyond all resistance by the thumping at the door and the random non-rhythm of the knocking, I did as he said. 'What do you intend to do, Doctor?' I asked again.

'Why,' he replied, manoeuvring me by the shoulders so that I was standing behind him, with the complicated wooden machine between us and the door, 'I intend to let them in, of course.'

Before I could protest, he turned, pulling a lever, and I stood aghast as the door swung open, revealing the unnerving figures of the Magus' likenesses.

One by one, they stepped through. Hitler's doppelgänger came first, glaring madly at us, followed by those of Goering and Goebbels. Then came the Formby replica, its horrible fixed grin unmoving as its eyes locked onto the ceremonial blade, standing with the urn and bowl and censer and medallion on their little table. After him came the Coward facsimile, its cigarette holder hanging louchely from its mouth, and the Gracie Fields, her curls still immaculate after our headlong pursuit. The effigies of Himmler and Rommel were not far behind, and with them two I guessed were Hess and von Ribbentrop. They all advanced towards the table where the objects stood, and towards us, the rapping sound of the signal re-echoing around us all. Finally, after a horribly unamusing moment in which their shoulders mechanically jostled one another in the narrow gap, the Laurel and Hardy duplicates stepped through, and likewise aimed their steady tread towards the relics.

The Doctor pushed his lever, and the cabinet doors closed behind them. Hitler had nearly reached us now, his crazed eyes staring unblinkingly at me — and I realised that, while the fake singers and actors were all heading towards the ritual objects, the German facsimiles were intent on the Doctor and myself. While their fellows still considered themselves tasked to recover the items for the Magus' ritual, the Nazi effigies aimed to capture us.

I backed away in terror as the Fuehrer's arms came up, stiff as a double salute, and extended themselves towards me, then —

'That's far enough, I think,' the Doctor said, and pulled his radio device from its pigeonhole. The resounding knocking sound ceased at once. And immediately, all twelve of the likenesses collapsed like puppets.

* * *

'That's why the burglars couldn't crawl under the leaded eaves, of course,' the Doctor explained, as he sank into a leathered wingback chair and fanned himself with a handkerchief. 'The Hardy likeness tried it, but he became inert immediately, and his friend had to pull him free. Once he was back in radio contact the signal reanimated him, but it must have been clear even to them that they couldn't get into Sir Jacob's house that way. Hence the change of plan. They can follow orders, but their initiative is strictly limited.'

I stared about me, marvelling once again at my impossible surroundings. 'So, this room is also shielded?'

'About as shielded as it's possible to be,' the Doctor agreed cheerfully, 'though not with anything so mundane as lead. My receiver had recorded the signal, of course, and I was able to use the console like a gramophone, to play it back acoustically. The likenesses weren't troubled by how the words reached them — as I say, the one in Samaria made do with written words on a scrap of parchment. As soon as the sonic signal ceased, though, poof! No more imitating life for them.'

The inexplicable presence in the birdcage voiced a relieved, 'Whew' The Doctor ignored it.

I gazed at the limp duplicates, piled now in a heap — a tangle of black serge, silver buttons and braid, with the occasional limb in tweed or richly-coloured silk sticking out here and there — and shuddered in relief at our escape. 'But won't the Magus send others after us?' I asked.

'That I can't rule out,' the Doctor admitted. 'And while we might be able to handle a dozen of them, he had ten times that many at the House of Likenesses. However firm our resolve, we can't face down an army. I think we need help.'

'I agree,' I said fervently. Did you have anyone particular in mind?'

He looked at me sternly. 'I think, Miss Weston, that the time has come for us to step downstairs and telephone your aunt.'

* * *

In the event, though, that was unnecessary. Because, as you know, Auntie, when we got down there to the office, you were there with your friends, waiting patiently for us in the electric light. You looked just the same as ever, in your twinset and pearls and half-moon glasses. 'Good evening, Doctor, Joan,' you greeted us austerely.

The Doctor eyed the soldiers with mistrust, but he addressed himself to you. He said, 'I presume, madam, that I am addressing Miss Weston's handler? The person she reports to at the War Office, or M.I.5, or whoever it is you both work for?'

You tutted. 'There's no call to sound so indignant, Doctor. You didn't suppose the British government would risk leaving you unwatched, did you?'

'Naturally not,' the Doctor agreed stiffly. 'That was why I placed my advertisement in the first place. Far better to have my observer here on the premises, where I could keep an eye on her.'

My eyes were moist, annoyingly. It must have been the shock of my recent ordeal. I told him, 'It was a matter of duty, Doctor. Duty to my country. You do understand that, don't you?'

'You should be grateful to Joan,' you told him. 'It was her report this afternoon that alerted us to your Mr Simony's side project. After the kerfuffle you kicked off this evening, we had to move in and close down the operation, sharpish. The guests are being debriefed as we speak. All the likenesses have been impounded, and Mr Simony is under lock and key.'

The Doctor snorted. 'I shall be most entertained to see how long *that* lasts,' he said. 'And I am indeed grateful to Miss Weston, and to your people for the loan of her. Her services have been invaluable to me, not least this evening. But you referred to "side projects". Am I to infer that the Magus' primary work here has been on your behalf?

I stared at him in startlement, which deepened when you nodded.

'Quite right,' you agreed. 'Although we'd not realised the scale of his plans, of course. That ritual of his wasn't what we had in mind, at all. There'd been no talk of

sacrificing anybody. Mr Simony promised us biddable duplicates who could stand in for Allied leaders — politicians, generals, members of the royal family and the like — to act as decoys and in case of assassination. It was the same for the cultural figures. If we started losing them it would be a poor show for morale.'

'And if some free-thinking troublemaker among them started to rock the boat, I dare say you could have got them away from the public eye without tipping anyone off,' the Doctor said with a hint of distaste.

'It would be preferable to the alternative,' you confirmed. 'If we'd had one in hand for the last King, it would have saved a great deal of unpleasantness.'

'The Axis leaders, though?' the Doctor wondered. 'I can see how the likenesses might do for the occasional public appearance, if they were thoroughly instructed first, but did you seriously think you could use them for infiltration?'

'We weren't altogether aware of their limitations,' you admitted coolly. 'Mr Simony misled us there. We could have done with a second opinion.'

'Ah,' replied the Doctor, sounding bored. 'I wondered when we might get to that. No, I shall certainly *not* be helping you with your little project, I'm afraid. An occult technology like the likenesses should never have been available to you at all — not in this time or place.'

You looked down modestly at your clasped hands as you said, We could impound that cabinet upstairs, you know.'

The Doctor scoffed. 'I'd like to see you try. No, the Magus is the only person likely to give you that kind of assistance, and after this evening's festivities, I rather fear...'

But at that point that a soldier came in at the door, and whispered quietly but urgently in your ear. I saw the displeasure in your expression at once, and so did the Doctor. `Ah,' he said slyly. 'Speak of the Devil.'

'Apparently Simony has managed to slip away from his guards,' you conceded. 'Those blonde creatures of his distracted them, the fools. It will only be a matter of time before he's found, of course.'

'That really didn't take him long,' the Doctor observed. 'It you're going to have any hope of keeping a mage of his abilities prisoner, you'll have to be better prepared than that. I can give you some tips, if you like.'

You frowned at that, Auntie. 'You said you wouldn't help us,' you pointed out.

'I said I wouldn't help in this specific matter,' the Doctor said, 'and I stand by that. The Ritual of Dynamis Mengele is an abomination, and will never be performed again if I have any say in the matter. The likenesses should also be destroyed — again, I can tell you the appropriate methods. Provided that's done — and on one other condition — there may be some scope for cooperation between us.'

I admit, Auntie, that my spirits rose at that. I would not care, I thought, to see the Doctor condemned as a hostile foreign agent, and consigned to some prison or internment camp, or even worse.

'You see,' the Doctor said, sitting down at his desk and steepling his hands, 'my role, like your Miss Weston's, is that of an observer. The... for simplicity's sake let us refer to them as people... whom I represent, believe that observing events turns them into history. The process is an alchemical one; the now as a crucible, transmuting the volatile mercury of tomorrow into the dull lead of yesterday. My colleagues know that the current War will affect the destiny of a great many people — far more than happen to be alive in the world today. By being here and taking note of what happens, "that destiny is...'

'Favourable?' I suggested, aware that the hope was an optimistic He shook his head. 'Sadly, Miss Weston, that is too subjective a criterion. I was going to say *reliable*. My principals find uncertainty, disconcerting. They prefer knowable pasts to surprise presents.'

Despite myself, I felt a crushing disappointment. Bitterly I said, 'Then it I really means nothing to you whether we win the War? Which countries fall and which stand? You don't care what the outcome is — just that there should be one?'

'There, my colleagues and I part company,' the Doctor admitted. 'For my own part I have to admit that, based on my observations so far, I would not care overmuch to see the Nazis triumph. Even so, I'm afraid my instructions explicitly forbid me from intervening.'

'That said,' he added musingly, I'm permitted a certain latitude of interpretation. One might deem it an essential part of an observer's role to prevent any contamination by outside influences, for instance.'

You pursed your lips. 'You're being too elliptical for me, Doctor. Come out with it, please.'

The Doctor said, 'There are certain irreconcilable philosophical differences between the Unity the Magus serves and those I represent. Where I observe, he accomplishes. He tried to pre-empt the outcome of my observations, to create an outcome that would be not merely reliable but *controlled*. If he should attempt such a thing again — or if the other powers that exist beyond this world should seek to intervene in this conflict of yours whether to aid one side or another, or for their own gain… well, I might be persuaded that it was my duty to stop them.'

'That's very generous of you,' you said sardonically.

'Not altogether,' the Doctor replied. 'I mentioned two conditions. '

'I think that we can come to an accommodation there,' you conceded 'The likenesses would make very poor soldiers. Without initiative or the ability to improvise, the tasks they can achieve are very few. I think I might persuade my superiors to do as you have asked.'

'I shall need proof of their destruction, mind,' the Doctor chided. 'And my second condition?'

You sighed. 'Well, I suppose we may as well hear it,' you said wearily, and I saw suddenly how desperate you must be to enlist the Doctor's help. I wondered what other 'outside influences' the British Government and its Allies have encountered since the beginning of the War.

He said, 'I shall require Miss Weston to stay on, please, as my liaison. On this, I fear, I will not take no for an answer. I have to admit that I've grown rather reliant upon her.'

The Doctor smiled, and once more I saw the gleam in his eye. This time, though, I knew for certain what it meant. He was — as he had always been — telling the exact truth.

THE CROSS OF VENUS

Andrew Hickey

The cloudy sky of Venus shrouds the planet in perpetual darkness. An observer who could not feel the stifling heat, or smell the sulphurous vapours, might assume themselves to be in the midst of a London pea-souper, while one who could feel those things would possibly be more inclined to think of places even more infernal. The whole atmosphere has a yellowish tinge, and while the visibility is good for about twenty feet, after that one can't tell whether one is looking at the air or a brick wall. It's devoid of life, and quite the most hopeless-feeling place in the whole Solar System, much worse than even desolate Pluto, which at least in its chilly blackness offers a reminder that it's a gateway to other suns, around which may circle more hospitable worlds. Venus inspires a feeling of loss, as soon as one steps on it, as if one's heart is aching for the possibilities that the planet can't deliver. It's an experience that makes the heart of even the most seasoned space traveller sink, and in every good guidebook to the Solar System, Venus is noted as a place to avoid, and one to spend as little time as possible on should one have to stop there at all.

It's certainly not a place where one expects to see children, especially excited children, and so had there been an observer watching, and had that observer not already been astonished by the materialisation of an object that clearly didn't belong on the planet, and had the observer not then been astonished by people emerging from that object, the observer should certainly have been amazed that two of the people who emerged were children, who were skipping with excitement as they exited their unusual craft, followed by a man in early middle age, with long flowing locks, a face with a wisdom somehow older than its years, and a light brown beard, wearing the ruff and brightly-coloured finery of a Georgian aristocrat, looking for all the world like Shakespeare dressed as Gainsborough's Blue Boy, and contrasting starkly with the brown blazer, cap, and shorts of the boy, and the plain chequered dress of the girl.

Our hypothetical observer would have been much less astonished, though, when the children — who, unlike our hypothetical observer, we know to be Jilly and Cedric, the

children of that mysterious traveller in space and time sometimes known as the Doctor — almost immediately lost that initial enthusiasm, as they seemed to realise that wherever it was they had landed, it wasn't what they were expecting.

Cedric took one sniff and turned to the Doctor. 'Phew! What a pong!' he exclaimed. Jilly nodded, and screwed up her face, although she was a little more concerned about the heat. It was all right for Cedric in his short trousers, she thought, but she had to wear a thick, heavy, dress.

'Now now,' said the Doctor, looking sternly at his son, 'I've told you before about that kind of language'.

Jilly looked at their father, 'I don't blame Cedric, Father. You told us we were visiting the beautiful beaches and funfairs of ancient Venus. You didn't say anything about a smell.'

'Smell?' The Doctor said, taking a deep breath, 'That's the bracing air of Venus.' He thumped his chest. 'Nothing like it.'

Cedric was dubious. 'And I don't see a beach or a funfair, either. Just yellow clouds and grey, dusty, ground.'

The Doctor looked thoughtful. 'Hmm... you're quite right, you know. There does seem to be a distinct lack of donkey rides and sticks of rock, doesn't there?' He reached into his pocket and took out Universal Chronometer. He glared at the device, as if it was misbehaving to spite him, which, knowing the relationship the Doctor had with his devices, it might well have been, and slapped it against the back of his hand. He looked at it again, and his eyebrows went up.

'Ah,' he said. 'I see what's happened. I forgot to carry the one when I was entering the chrono-ordinates into the ship's navigation systems.' Jilly and Cedric both rolled their eyes. Their father did this kind of thing all the time, and they were used to it by now.

'So where are we, then?' Cedric asked.

'Oh, we're definitely on Venus...' the Doctor checked his Universal Chronometer again, in case it had been lying to him the first time, then slipped it back in his pocket. 'Oh yes, definitely Venus. But I'm afraid we're a million years too late. We're in Earth year 1975, long after all the Venusian people have gone.'

'1975?!' Cedric was astonished. 'We're in the future?'

'We've been to the future many times, silly,' said Jilly.

'I know, but that was far, far away. 1975 is *our* future!' Cedric exclaimed. 'Why, back home I'd be... gosh! I'd be thirty-five years old! That's almost as old as you, Father!'

The Doctor smiled indulgently and ruffled Cedric's blonde hair. 'Not quite, Cedric, not quite.' Cedric's face fell. 'So that means we don't get to go to the funfair today, then?'

The Doctor checked the date on his Universal Chronometer one last time. 'No, I'm afraid not. But we might be able to do something else fun. How would you like to see a rocket ship take off?'

'Really?' Cedric's freckled face split into a wide grin. 'Cor, that would be super!'

Jilly nodded earnestly. 'I should like that very much, Father.'

'Well, you're in luck, my dear, because today, November the third 1975, is the day that the first Earth explorers to visit Venus fly back home, and if I'm right, their rocketport is only about half a mile yonder. The takeoff should be in about five hours.' He pointed, and then took a sniff of the air. 'You're right about the smell, though — what a pong! I think I'll go and get my helmet from the ship.'

Jilly and Cedric laughed.

* * *

The rocket turned out to be more than a mile away, rather than the half mile the Doctor had said, but soon enough the travellers arrived at the rocketport, the Doctor and Cedric now wearing space helmets and air tanks — Jilly had decided that it was hot enough without trapping her head in a bubble. The children looked around in wonder at the tin shacks, at the several acres that had been concreted over to create a flat takeoff space for the rocket ship that stood in the distance, and at all the people milling round working on the launch.

They had never seen anything like this before. Their father's ship was, at least on the outside, a very small and ramshackle thing, and it didn't seem at all impressive. Of course, they knew it could visit all sorts of times and places that a rocket ship couldn't — Cedric would never forget their trip to the tenth dimension, and their experiences with the fiendish Nabob of Nowhere — but it looked very ordinary indeed.

This rocket, though, was absolutely extraordinary. It must have stood at least a hundred feet tall, and even looking at it through the thick yellow Venusian fog the children marvelled at this great feat of British craftsmanship.

'Gosh,' said Jilly. 'I had no idea rocket ships were so big.'

'They have to be, my dear,' said the Doctor. 'These people travelled to Venus and stayed here for a year, and they needed to bring everything they needed for the journey with them. There are no plants or animals on Venus any more, and so they had to bring a whole year's worth of food with them.'

'What happened to all the life?' Jilly asked.

The Doctor suddenly looked extremely sad. 'People happened to it,' he said, quietly.

'What do you mean?' Cedric asked, but the Doctor shook his head. 'It's not something we should talk about.'

Cedric opened his mouth, but the Doctor held up his hand with a grim expression on his face, and the mouth was quickly closed. Cedric knew that expression, and he knew not to push things. The Doctor stood there, looking mournful, for a moment, and then shook his head and pulled himself together.

'Shall we go and see if we can talk to the astronauts?'

'Oh, Father, let's!' Jilly exclaimed. 'That would be such an adventure!'

Cedric smiled and nodded as well, all concern about the fate of Venus' native life gone. The Doctor smiled too, a little more wistfully, and the three of them headed down the long path towards the spaceport.

* * *

Meanwhile, in a tin-walled office nearby, a man with a slight moustache wearing a stiff blue uniform was pacing nervously. Captain Thomas 'Boffo' Henderson was eyeing the mound of papers that had piled up on his desk, and knowing that now there was no way he was going to get to them before takeoff. He took a pull on the pipe in his mouth, which he hadn't noticed had gone out. He knew he had no need to worry, and that the crew he had were among the very best that the King's Space Force could offer, but he was still on edge. Things had been strange recently, and a lot of minor problems had come up on the Venus mission. Nothing the crew couldn't handle of course -these were the best men that the Empire had to offer, and even Comrade Kareshnikov, the observer from the Republic of Merkovia, was all right for one of that lot — but still, a chap had to be concerned when things went wrong'

He hated to admit it, but he was quite looking forward to heading off the benighted rock they were on and getting back to civilisation, much as he had to put on a brave face for the crew. When he looked in the eager, faithful, guileless face of the Reverend Wilson, the Chaplain, he knew that that man was giving him his unwavering trust, and it would take a much harder man than Henderson not to be moved by the Chaplain's unquestioning faith.

He mopped his brow, looking at the tin walls of the prefabricated shed that had been his base of operations for the last three months. It was almost starting to feel like home by now, but he would never get used to the stench of Venus, or the heat, and those walls would sometimes glow red hot in the scorching Venusian noon, even though they had landed on the coolest part of the planet. He was looking forward to being home by Christmas, and seeing some of that good old British snow — or even slush. He should be feeling nothing but excitement at the prospect of the flight.

But still... there had been that slow leak in the fuel tanks that they'd discovered, which had put off their departure by a week. There'd been the computer failure, which meant that they had been forced to work out their trajectory by hand — it was lucky that slide rules couldn't have circuit failures, though Captain Henderson was sure that if they could, they would have, given all the other problems. And there was... but no, best to put that out of his mind.

He was thinking these thoughts when his desk intercom buzzed. He flicked the switch, already dreading the news that was about to come, which would surely be about yet another technical hitch.

'What is it now, Prentice?' he asked, glumly.

'Er, there's someone here to see you,' came the confused voice from the intercom.

'Who is it? Is it Kareshnikov again?'

'No, it's someone new.'

'Talk sense, man. What do you mean, someone new?'

'I mean it's someone we've never seen before. A man and two kids.'

'You've gone barmy, Prentice. Report to Doc Stebbins immediately, get him to give you a shot.'

Henderson flicked off the intercom and took a sip from the mug of tea on his desk and winced. That was one thing he was definitely not going to miss that about Venus — it was almost impossible to make a good cup of tea on that benighted planet. He wasn't sure why it was — maybe it was something to do with the gravity affecting the boiling point of water, maybe the smell of the atmosphere made it taste funny, or maybe it was just the fact that he had to use dehydrated milk rather than the real thing — but whatever the reason, it tasted foul, and the only reason he continued to drink the muck was out of pure stubbornness. If he was going to keep wearing his Space Force uniform even in this blasted heat, he was hardly going to let the planet stop him from having a cup of tea.

As these thoughts went through his head, the door opened, and Henderson was astonished to see a middle-aged man and two children entering the room, precisely as his assistant had told him. And if that weren't bizarre enough, the man was dressed as if he was about to appear in *The Merchant of Venice*, and wearing a space helmet but with a hat on under it. Henderson was so shaken his jaw dropped open, and he instinctively reached to catch his pipe before realising he'd removed it from his mouth to drink his tea.

Who on Earth are you?!' he asked.

'We're not anyone on Earth,' said the younger of the two children, a boy with freckles and light blonde hair, looking at the Captain cheekily through his helmet.

The man looked down at the boy with an exasperated expression. 'Now, Cedric, what have I told you about being facetious?'

Cedric sighed. 'That you should only be facetious when you really want to irritate someone, or when you have something particularly clever to say.

'Precisely. And we don't want to irritate this gentleman, do we?' Cedric shook his head, and didn't try to argue that he'd said anything clever. The man stepped forward and offered his hand. 'Good day, sir. I am the Doctor, and these are my children, Cedric and Jilly.'

Suddenly all was, if not clear, somewhat clearer.

'The Doctor? The Doctor who defeated the Moon-man invasion?'

The Doctor smiled. 'The very same.'

'The Doctor who built Bot-u-tron, the thinking robot?'

'It is indeed I.'

'The Doctor who accidentally melted all the snow in Britain last Christmas?'

The Doctor nervously adjusted his ruff and coughed, embarrassed. 'I may well be, but if so, it has not happened yet.'

Henderson gaped in amazement. 'So, the stories are true then? You have a time machine?'

Cedric jumped in eagerly. 'Oh yes, the ship can go to anywhere, in all times, and in space too!'

'And so you've chosen to visit my expedition and see this historic moment for yourself, eh?'

Jilly opened her mouth, and the Doctor looked sternly at her. She quickly closed her mouth again.

'That's right,' said the Doctor, 'of all the times and places in the universe, we thought we would come and visit the first men on Venus, on your last day here.'

'Well, I'll be blowed! The chaps will be absolutely thrilled to meet you! And please, take your helmets off — we have an excellent air filtration system in here.'

The Doctor and Cedric took their helmets off, and took deep breaths, pleased to find that the noxious fumes from outside hadn't made their way into the office. Henderson went over to the intercom and pressed the switch. It crackled into life. 'Yes, sir?'

'Prentice, get all the fellows together and tell them to come to my office. There's someone here I think they'd like to meet.'

'Aye, sir.' Henderson flicked the intercom off again. Now, Doctor, can I get you anything? A snifter of brandy perhaps?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not for me, thank you.'

'Suit yourself.'

The door opened, and in walked five men, all looking very confused

'Ah, gentlemen,' said Henderson, 'allow me to introduce the Doctor, and his delightful children — I'm sorry, I've forgotten your names.'

'Jilly and Cedric,' said Jilly, quickly.

'His delightful children, Cedric and Jilly.' Jilly pulled a face at Henderson's reversal of their names, but said nothing.

'*The* Doctor?' asked a large, red-haired man with a Northern accent.

'That's right, Campbell,' said Henderson, 'Doctor, this is our engineer, James Campbell. Campbell, this is the world-famous Doctor.'

'Well, worlds-famous now!' joked an earnest-looking, white-haired, bespectacled man in clerical clothing, with a small crucifix around his neck.

'Doctor, this is Chaplain Wilson. He's been absolutely essential to our morale, with his joking and his spiritual support.'

'And more importantly,' said Wilson, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a crumpled paper bag, 'with my supply of aniseed balls. Would either of you children like one?'

'No, thank you,' said Jilly politely, as Cedric reached out and took a sweet from the bag. 'I'm not very fond of the smell.'

Wilson took one as well and popped it into his mouth. 'Take a few,' said Wilson to Cedric, who enthusiastically took several from the bag and shoved them in the pocket of his shorts.

Henderson then gestured to a younger man, in a uniform similar to Henderson's. 'This is Lieutenant Prentice, my second-in-command'.

'We've already met,' said the Doctor, smiling.

'Oh, of course, so you have. And this is Dr Stebbins,' he pointed to a tall, balding, man in a lab coat, with his glasses currently resting on the to his head.

'Doctor,' said Dr Stebbins, distractedly.

'Doctor,' said the Doctor, nodding in acknowledgment.

'And finally,' Henderson gestured to a man dressed in a black suit, with a short black goatee beard, wearing an eyepatch over his left eye, 'we have Comrade Kareshnikov, the official observer sent here from the Republic of Merkovia. Comrade Kareshnikov, may I present the Doctor?'

'An honour to meet you,' said the Doctor politely, offering his hand, which Kareshnikov refused to take.

'Shaking hands is bourgeois capitalist practice,' said Kareshnikov in a thick accent. 'And "Doctor" is title, not name. In Merkovia, we do not use titles other than Comrade. What is name?'

The Doctor thought for a moment. 'I suppose you can call me Comrade Who if you need to.'

Kareshnikov nodded, curtly. Campbell then coughed. 'I'm sorry, Doctor, but you've come at rather a crucial time. We're only two hours away from the final lift-off.'

The Doctor lifted his eyebrows and pulled out his Universal Chronometer. 'Really? I thought...' he glanced at the Chronometer and put it back in his pocket. 'Never mind. Of course, you should get back to work.'

'If that's all right with you, of course, Captain?' asked Campbell.

'Oh, absolutely,' said Henderson. 'Dismissed.' The group filed out of the office.

'So, it's all hands on deck at the moment?' The Doctor asked.

'Oh yes,' said Henderson. 'Everyone has to pull their weight. Even Comrade Kareshnikov has to do his share of the work, even though he's here as an observer. We can't afford any dead weight on a mission like this. I'm sure as a space traveller yourself, you understand the need for all your crew to do their part.'

The Doctor stifled a laugh at the thought of Cedric and Jilly doing anything at all around the ship, and nodded politely. 'Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Must run a disciplined ship, what? Anyway, if we're in the way, we'll be happy to retreat to a safe distance. It's been an absolute pleasure meeting you all, and may I wish you all a safe journey home?'

'The pleasure has been ours, Doctor,' said Henderson, 'and may we hope we shall see you back on Earth?'

'I do hope so,' said the Doctor. `I shall try my utmost to be there for your welcome home party.'

The Doctor and the children left, and as they filed past the rocket Jilly couldn't help looking back at Kareshnikov, who was working intently, fastening bolts on the ship's exterior. There was something she didn't like about that man.

* * *

As the group trudged back towards their ship, helmets back on, Cedric turned to the Doctor and asked a question. 'Father, I thought you said we were going to be watching a rocket ship launch?'

'We are,' replied the Doctor.

'But Father,' said Jilly, 'we're walking away from the rocket!'

'That's right.'

'So,' Jilly continued, 'how are we going to see the rocket take off? This Venusian fog is so thick that I can hardly see my own hand!'

'Oh, that's easy,' the Doctor replied. We use the polarisers on the side of our helmets. You know how polarising lenses can make sunny days seem less bright?'

The children nodded.

'Well, these are the opposite, so instead of making things dimmer, they make them less foggy. Try it.' He pressed a button on the side of his helmet and Cedric did the same.

'But what about me, Father? I'm not wearing a helmet' Jilly pointed out.

'Oh, I have a pair of depolarising glasses for you'. The Doctor fumbled in one of his pockets, and then another, and then a third, and a fourth, pulling out a yo-yo, a string of flags of all nations, a water pistol and finally a pair of cardboard spectacles with tinted lenses. He handed the latter to Jilly, who put them on.

'Gosh!' she said, 'You can see everything!'

And she could. With the glasses on, she could suddenly see the rocket ship, almost a mile away but so tall it looked as big as a house, even from that distance. HMS *King Charles*, the pride of His Majesty's fleet, was an astonishing sight — gleaming bronze, painted with the union flag and the flag of the United Nations, every bolt and rivet gleaming in the bright Venusian sun.

'Oh Father,' gasped Cedric, 'It's wonderful!'

They watched in awe as the crew, small as ants at this distance, scurried round the base of the towering rocket ship doing last-minute preparations. Finally, a ladder was pushed to the rocket, and the crew one at a time climbed it, wearing full spacesuits (which Jilly thought must have been diabolically hot in the Venusian weather), and waved in the children's direction as they entered the door to the rocket, which slammed behind them.

A countdown came over a tannoy, just audible in the distance: 'Ten... nine... eight... seven...' Cedric pulled his helmet off, took a sweet out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth without looking, rolling it around against his teeth without taking his eyes off the rocket as he replaced the helmet.

The countdown was soon drowned out, though, by the roar from the rocket engine, which was almost deafening even a mile away. Jilly and Cedric were nearly hugging themselves with excitement at the thought that they were about to see a rocket take off, but the Doctor was worried. Something didn't sound quite right to him. Suddenly he realised what it was, and hurriedly pressed a button on his radio watch.

'Doctor to *King Charles*! Cancel launch! Cancel launch! Do you copy?'

The radio watch buzzed. 'Copy Doctor. But you'd better have a dashed good reason.'

'I do,' the Doctor said, as the engines shut off.

'What's wrong, Father?' asked Jilly. Why did you get them to stop the launch?'

'That sound,' the Doctor said. 'I've heard it before...'

* * *

The Doctor and the children stood at the bottom of the rocket as the astronauts descended. Even through their visors it was possible to tell that they were in a foul mood, and that impression was only confirmed When Captain Henderson took off his helmet.

'Well, Doctor,' said the Captain, 'I hope you've got a good explanation for this. It's only because your reputation precedes you that I did as you asked.'

The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck nervously. 'I do, but I'd rather not say in front of your men.'

'Nonsense,' said Henderson. 'Anything you can say in front of me, you can say in front of them. I trust them absolutely.'

The Doctor's neck-rubbing intensified, to the point where Cedric started to wonder if he was going to rub all the skin off his neck, and then wondered if maybe *he* could rub all the skin off his own neck, so he wouldn't get told off all the time for not washing it properly. He would have to think about this later, he decided, because his father was clearly bothered about something, and had started talking again.

'Really, Captain, this is not...'

'Come on man!' Henderson exclaimed irritably, 'Out with it!'

The Doctor continued to hesitate, and Henderson turned round and started walking back towards the ladder. 'Right men, back on the ship!'

'No!' The Doctor cried out. 'You mustn't! That was a coolant leak! If the rocket had kept trying to take off, it would have exploded, and killed everyone on the ship!'

Henderson stopped in mid-stride and turned around. 'Good gracious, man, are you serious?'

'I've never been more so in my life, I'm afraid.'

'Well why the blazes didn't you say so straight away?'

'Because, Captain, I believe your ship has been sabotaged!'

Everyone fell silent for a moment. Prentice, who was closest to the rocket, seemed to wobble, and quickly sat on one of the rungs. Chaplain Wilson's mouth dropped open in shock, and a half-sucked aniseed ball fell out onto the floor (and Jilly wrinkled her nose in disgust — she'd never liked the ghastly things at all, and seeing one dropping onto the floor was the most disgusting thing she'd seen since the slime monsters on Jebulon Prime). Campbell's eyebrows raised slightly, but he didn't seem anywhere near as surprised by this revelation as anyone else. And Kareshnikov's face hardened, his mouth tightening behind his black goatee, and his dark eyebrows furrowing.

Campbell was the first to get his composure back, and he nodded thoughtfully. 'That would explain a lot. We've been having nothing but problems with the equipment for the last two weeks. The computer failed, and then the antenna on the radio broke so we couldn't get in touch with the Moon base. I thought it was just bad luck, but of course it's sabotage. I think we all know who's responsible, as well, don't we?'

He looked pointedly at Kareshnikov, who glared back at him. 'Do we?' Kareshnikov asked. 'Perhaps you would care to enlighten the rest of us?'

'Oh, come on!' said Campbell. 'We all know that your lot are jealous of British success in space. You want to bring your crazy political ideas out to all the other planets.'

Kareshnikov raised his eyebrow. 'I see. And perhaps you could explain how my sacrificing my own life should aid in this ambition?'

Campbell glared at him, and said 'We all know that human life is cheap to fanatics like you.'

Chaplain Wilson coughed. 'I don't think there's any reason to be pointing fingers, is there? I'm sure the people of Merkovia value their own lives just as much as those of us from the British Empire do.'

Kareshnikov nodded curtly. 'You're right, of course,' said Captain Henderson. 'If we're to be at all fair, we have to assume that anyone could be a suspect. And that means we can't trust anyone to fix this. We're stuck here!'

The Doctor gave a small cough. 'If I may point out, there is someone here who wasn't present for these earlier incidents. And I do happen to have some small amount of technical expertise. Well, actually, I have quite a lot of technical expertise, but one doesn't like to blow one's own trumpet, does one? '

'Of course!' Henderson exclaimed. 'Doctor, would you please fix this leak, so we can get off this horrid planet before anything else goes wrong?'

'I'd be delighted,' said the Doctor. 'I shall go and fetch my toolbox from the ship.'

'Oh, but we have tools here,' said Campbell. 'There's no need for you to get yours'.

The Doctor smiled. 'I think I'll use my own anyway.'

* * *

Half an hour later, the Doctor and his children were crammed into the rocket's engineering room, a room that would barely qualify as a cupboard in normal circumstances, but in the confines of a rocket ship was positively spacious. The Doctor was bent down, looking at a piece of rubber tubing, with a thoughtful expression.

'Just as I thought,' he muttered to himself. 'Neatly cut in two.' He gave a quick wave of his Atomic Desecarator, and the two halves of the line, as if by magic, came back together and fused into a single piece.

'There,' he said, with a satisfied tone, 'good as new, and no harm done!'

'Except for the harm to my nose of Cedric eating those revolting-smelling aniseed balls!' Jilly said, in a tone which suggested that she wasn't really joking. She gave a sniff, wrinkled up her face, and wafted her hand in front of her nose as if to wave the smell away.

'What do you mean?' Cedric asked. 'I'm wearing a helmet! You couldn't smell it even if I was eating one — and I ran out ages ago! In fact, I was wondering if we're going to see Chaplain Wilson again, and if he'd let me have a few more.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'I think it might be a very good idea to go and see the Chaplain. A very good idea indeed.'

* * *

When the Doctor and his children entered the tin shack that served as the base's Mess Hall, Henderson, Campbell, Stebbins, and Prentice were sat around one table

gloomily, drinking tea from tin mugs, while Kareshnikov was sat at another table, on his own. He had clearly been sent to Coventry, and the Doctor would have said that you could cut the atmosphere with a knife, except that that wasn't far from the truth on Venus.

'All fixed!' he said, with a big smile on his face, wiping his hands together as if he were dusting them off, though in truth he had not done anything that would have dirtied them. 'And how is everyone doing here?'

'We're fine,' said Prentice, 'except we need to figure out what to do with the traitor over there.'

'I am no traitor,' said Kareshnikov curtly.

'Maybe not to your country,' said Prentice, 'but you're a dashed traitor to the whole of mankind!'

'I have said before, and I shall say again,' said the Merkovian, 'I am not responsible for these attacks on the ship. If indeed they are attacks, and not just shoddy capitalistic engineering. I admit that I have been asked by my government to spy on this mission, but that is all. I am a spy, not a saboteur.'

'You little...' yelled Campbell, enraged, and he got up so fast he knocked his chair back, and ran at Kareshnikov, muscles bulging and the veins on his neck standing out. He grabbed Kareshnikov and started shaking him back and forth. 'Confess, you coward! Confess!'

Dr. Stebbins stepped towards Henderson, who was facing away from the others, and pulled out a syringe from his pocket, injecting it into the red-haired man's bicep. Campbell immediately collapsed to the floor, and Kareshnikov stepped away, adjusting his lapels, and retook his seat as if nothing unusual had happened.

'Just a little sedative,' said Stebbins, looking at the slumbering form of Campbell with concern. We've all been a bit highly-strung at the moment. He'll be right as rain in half an hour.'

'Understandable,' said the Doctor. He looked over at the children who looked shaken. 'But I think this has upset the children a little.'

'Oh no, Father, we're fine!' said Jilly, a little too enthusiastically, trying to smile. Cedric nodded.

The Doctor smiled sadly, 'No, you're not, and I think you need something to calm you down too.' He raised his hand quickly at Stebbins. 'Not one of your shots, don't worry.' Stebbins smiled, ruefully. 'But I don't suppose you'd happen to have some cocoa in here for these two, would you?'

'I think we can rustle something up,' said Prentice, smiling.

'Good, good,' replied the Doctor, with a distracted air. 'Could you look after them for a little while? I just want to have a quick word with the Chaplain. I don't suppose you know where he is at the moment, do you?'

* * *

Chaplain Wilson knelt by the rocket ship, hands trembling as he applied a wrench to the very same bolt that Kareshnikov had been working on earlier, his face covered with sweat. Whether the sweat and trembling were from the oppressive Venusian weather, from the physically demanding work he was doing, or from some other source of stress, it would be impossible for an outside observer to say.

At least, it would be impossible for an outside observer with only a normal understanding of human nature. But the Doctor was both more naturally perceptive than most observers, and someone who had spent more he lifetimes than he cared to think about observing the ways of humanity, and he had a fairly shrewd idea of why the Chaplain seemed so stressed. He walked up behind the kneeling man, removed his helmet, and gave a cough.

The Chaplain dropped his wrench and swivelled round, the stress on his face instantly giving way to surprise, and the Doctor realised that while the man's face was lined and his hair was white, in other respects he still looked like quite a young man. The Doctor, having himself lived for far longer than his own appearance would suggest, wondered what had caused the clergyman to seem so much older than his years.

'Doctor!' said the Chaplain. 'I didn't see you there! I was just checking on Kareshnikov's work. Who knows what sabotage he's been up to?'

The Doctor knelt to take a look, as the Chaplain stood up, the wrench still in his hand.

'Hmm...' the Doctor said thoughtfully. 'It looks to me as if Kareshnikov's work was fine, but you were unscrewing the bolts he'd tightened.'

Still looking intently at the metalwork, the Doctor raised a hand up and grabbed Wilson's arm as it swung down towards his head, the wrench mere inches from the Doctor's skull. The two held their positions for a second, the Doctor firmly clasping Wilson's outstretched forearm, still not looking up, and then the Chaplain's hand loosened its grip, the wrench fell to the ground with a slight *thunk*, and Wilson sagged to the ground, sobbing, with all the tension gone from every muscle in his body.

The Doctor turned, still kneeling, and held the cleric in his arms, allowing the white-haired man to weep on his shoulder. After a moment he asked, softly, 'Why?'

The Chaplain pulled off his crucifix and handed it to the Doctor. 'You know,' he said thoughtfully, 'not one of the crew asked where I got this from, or why I started wearing it, even though I'm an Anglican.'

The Doctor smiled. We all imagine that others know more about our fields of expertise than they do. I'm sure Campbell wonders why you never notice anything about his force vector calculations. So where did you get it?'

'Take a look, and you'll understand.' The Doctor took a close look at the crucifix. It was a tiny thing, barely the size of his little finger, and made out of some alloy he couldn't identify for the moment. He held it up to his eyes. The metal seemed on closer inspection to be slightly melted, and then the Doctor noticed the detail that had evidently not been noticed by any of the men with whom the Chaplain had been serving for a year.

The crucified figure on the cross looked like a man, except it had five eyes.

The Doctor looked gravely at the Chaplain, who nodded sadly. ‘I found it in a ruined building, in the first week of our mission, while We were investigating what had happened to the people of Venus. You know what it means, of course?'

'I know what it means to me,' the Doctor whispered, 'but why not tell me what it means to you?'

The Chaplain looked into the distance, the tears in his eyes all gone, and now appearing entirely determined. 'It means that Christ came to Venus, too. He came in the form of a Venusian, to save them all, just as he came to Earth.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Go on.'

'But. . .' the Chaplain looked away. 'But he failed.'

'The nuclear war,' said the Doctor, quietly.

'Yes. The nuclear war. These Venusians — these *people*, because if Christ tried to save their souls, they must have been people, however different they looked — they were Christians. And yet they destroyed their own race. They wiped out all life on their planet.'

The Doctor nodded, sadly. 'But we all know that religion is, at best, a limited protection against the evil in men's hearts, not a complete cure. Some of the worst atrocities in history have been carried out in the name of God or Christ.'

The Chaplain bristled. 'You think I don't know that? Doctor, I am well aware of the limitations of men of faith. If nothing else, my own limitations have taught me well. But this is on a different order of things. This is wiping out a whole planet.'

'But why try to destroy the rocket? Why destroy the aerial so you couldn't communicate with the Moonbase?' The Doctor suspected the answer, but wanted to hear it from Wilson's lips.

'Because this cannot be allowed to become known. Imagine what would happen if the news spread across the Earth. If Christian Venusians could do such a thing, so could Christian Earthmen, and once people realised that, it might lead to a nuclear war on our own planet. Once something stops being unthinkable, all too often it becomes acceptable.'

The Doctor smiled sadly. 'True. But it could also stand as a warning. I rather think it might, don't you?'

The Chaplain nodded.

'But there was another reason, wasn't there?' The Chaplain sighed.

'Yes. I realised that if people on Earth heard about this — heard that Christians could act in this way — they might wonder if Christ had the ability to save anyone at all. They might lose their faith altogether.'

'And so you wanted to sacrifice the crew to stop people losing their faith?'

'I had no other choice. You must see that, mustn't you?' The Chaplain was sobbing again now, and the Doctor gently embraced him once more.

'I think you do have a choice,' the Doctor said after a moment.

'"Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." A faith based on lies can only be a false faith, but one that can acknowledge the truth, and accept it... that faith could move mountains. Or perhaps move half a dozen men from one planet to another.'

The Doctor offered the crucifix to Wilson, who dried his eyes with his sleeve, then nodded, took the cross back, and hung it around his neck.

'Now,' said the Doctor, 'shall we get those bolts tightened?' The two men got to work.

* * *

The Doctor, Cedric, and Jilly stood on a nearby hilltop, watching the final preparations for the launch. The Doctor looked at his Universal Chronometer once more. 'Right on time,' he muttered to himself as the countdown started.

He pulled a paper bag out of his pocket and handed it to Cedric. 'The Chaplain asked me to give you these.'

'Cor!' said Cedric, 'That's almost a quarter-pound of aniseed balls!'

The Doctor smiled. 'No rationing in the 1970s.' Jilly looked unimpressed, but her expression soon turned to amazement as the rocket's engines roared into life, scouring the

wound around them with bright orange fires — the first fire to be seen on the surface of the planet with for almost a million years, but not the last. The noise was again almost deafening as the gleaming bronze rocket ship lifted into the Venusian sky and disappeared out of view. Jilly thought she saw a tear in her father's eye, thou she couldn't be sure — his helmet seemed to have misted up.

As they walked back to their ship, Jilly asked, 'So do they get back safely? What happens to them?'

'Are you sure you want to know?' The Doctor asked. 'This is your future, after all. I shouldn't want to spoil the surprise for you.'

'Oh do please tell us, Father,' Cedric said through a mouthful of aniseed balls, which he'd somehow managed to pop in his mouth without anyone seeing him take his helmet off, though as we all know, a young boy can seemingly break the laws of nature with ease if it means he gets to eat a few penn'orth of sweets.

'Very well,' said the Doctor as they approached the ship, and he started patting his pockets looking for his keys. 'They make it back to Earth safely, of course, and they become heroes, all of them.'

'Even Wilson?' Asked Jilly.

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor. 'He most of all. He goes all over the world, telling everyone about the war on Venus, and about the cross he found.'

'Did Jesus really come to Venus, Father?' Cedric asked, wide-eyed. 'Is that why that cross was there?'

'I honestly don't know,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'The cross is a very simple shape, and there are many reasons the Venusians could have made that one. I doubt we shall ever know the real reason it was made. But What mattered is what it meant to Wilson, and to the people he talked to. The story of the Venusian nuclear horrors scared everyone, of all faiths and none and made them realise the consequences of war. By 1990, there was a world government, and an end to all war on Earth. And all the time and effort people put into war, they could instead put into curing disease and ending hunger. A thousand years later, the Earth will become a paradise — a new Eden, instead of an inferno like Venus. And that's thanks to Chaplain Wilson. Would you like to see it?'

He finally found his key, and opened the door to the ship. 'Gosh, that would be lovely!' Jilly exclaimed.

'Right then,' said the Doctor, 'we're off to the year three thousand!'

And as the ship faded away, an observer, had there been one, might have heard a loud wheezing, groaning sound, and might also have heard — or might merely have imagined hearing — the Doctor quietly saying to himself 'So long as I don't forget to carry the one again...'

GAUNTLET OF ABSOLUTION

Kara Dennison

On a beautiful planet free of crime, the Doctor and his newest travelling companion discover that perfection comes with a price! What horrors await beyond the alabaster walls of the Noble Keep?

For some, the appearance of the TARDIS from thin air on their home world was met with confusion, bemusement, or even fear. Some fled, sensing an incongruous power from the vessel as it warped and shifted to fit its surroundings. Others scoffed at the sight, believing it to be a prank and not wanting to give its perpetrator the satisfaction of a reaction. But as the TARDIS materialised on the pinkish-white earth of Idrotha, butted up just against the inside of its capital kingdom's outer walls, the two guards nearby only watched calmly.

The mechanical wailing ceased with a *thump* of finality, and a door on the front opened inward just a crack. The end of a brass spyglass emerged, darting around cartoonishly. It moved up, down, and up again, taking in the guards' full height.

'I say,' came a voice from within, muffled by the door, 'would you mind going over there? You're right in the path of my grand entrance.' The end of the spyglass jerked to the right.

The guards looked at each other, then back at the TARDIS, but did not move.

'No? Go on. It's a new face and everything. I've spent hours getting a look put together.'

When no reply came yet again, the spyglass dropped in disappointment. 'Oh, very well. Your loss.' The instrument darted back inside, and the door opened the rest of the way. The man who emerged did indeed seem prepared for a dramatic entrance, decked out in dandyish fashion from his feathered hat to his tasselled shoes. The cascades of dark curls that spilled from his hat and framed his young face had a palpable wig-ness to them: if it was his real hair, he was very unfortunate. There was a definite jaunt to his step, even in his

obvious disappointment: he'd practiced his swashbuckling for absolutely hours, and it was a crime that his first audience wasn't receptive.

'Well,' the new arrival said tersely, sneering as he snapped his spyglass shut, 'I shall forgive you this time, but don't let it happen again. Got it? Good. Now, where can I find the head fellow in charge? I've called ahead for an appointment.'

After another look between them, one of the guards stepped forward, reaching out a meaty fist. The overdressed gentleman swiftly crouched in a defensive posture, glaring over his outstretched hands. But the guard simply grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around, pulling the man's hands behind his back.

'How *dare* you!?' the man shouted incredulously. 'I've been here less than a minute and I'm already being attacked!' He raised his head. 'Guards! Guards! Arrest these men!'

The second guard slapped a pair of handcuffs on the man's crossed Wrists. Tor the greater glory of the Noble Keep, you are under arrest.'

'I beg your pardon? I've just arrived! What could you possibly have against me?'

The first guard pointed to the TARDIS, valiantly attempting to blend in and failing. 'Unlicensed vehicle on royal grounds.'

The man grimaced as the pair roughly shoved him ahead of them, 'Honestly. All these years, and they finally get me on a parking violation.'

* * *

Rue stared out the window of the cramped little cart. Through the bars, she could see the rising spires of the Noble Keep, silvery-white against the lavender Idrothan sky. They had instilled wonder in her when she was a child, stretching ever upward so it seemed they might pierce the heavens. Now, they just looked ostentatious, a landmark seen one too many times on a road trip.

'How's the leg?' asked the guard seated across from her. They always sent her with a female guard, as though that made things any more comfortable. Guards were guards, there to watch her and crack her wrists if she got out of line. And these days, what constituted 'out of line' changed by the hour.

'What do you care?' Rue muttered. 'You're not going to be the one in the arena with me.'

The guard cleared her throat. 'I'm only asking out of interest. It's your seventh season in the Gauntlet. Aren't you getting a little tired of coming in second and tromping home after?'

Rue rolled her left ankle experimentally, holding back a wince of pain as she did so. Thanks to a fight with another prisoner, she wasn't in peak condition. But, she thought morosely, that wasn't going to be what stopped her this season. It would be the same as always... but she still had no intention of backing down.

'I'm fine,' she said at last. 'Top form. Might actually take it this year I think.'

The guard took note.

* * *

The door of the cell slammed resoundingly behind the Doctor as he rubbed his wrists, just freed of their constraints. He looked over his shoulder at the tiny window in the door,

through which one of the guards was still eyeing him. He couldn't tell which one. They were both identical in their meanness.

'I shall be speaking to my lawyer!' the Doctor snapped. The little window was promptly slammed shut in his face.

'What did they get you for, then?' asked a creaky voice from across the cell. The Doctor peered through the darkness. He was sharing the space with two other men, evidently: a stocky fellow with a greying beard, and a frightened-looking teenager who looked as though he'd been ripped unceremoniously away from revising for his exams.

The Doctor tutted. 'Parking. Well, that's what it says on the paperwork. I reckon it's more that they feel threatened by me.'

The older man cracked a grin. 'You know, I think you may be right about that.'

'I like that. I like you. And, er...' The Doctor pointed a flattened hand toward the teenager. 'I suppose we'll see how you do. So, what did they nick you for?'

The boy shook his head. 'Dunno. I was just sittin' on a bench outside, readin', and one of those big fellas came along and dragged me away. Said I was litterin'. I don't remember litterin'.' His voice shook more and rose higher the longer he talked, until the older man put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder.

'Easy there, Hendry. Don't want to blow your heart out at your age, do we?' The older man's in held, and seemed genuine. 'Golligh, by the way.'

'Pleasure. I'm the Doctor. What about you, then?'

'Ah, well.' Golligh shrugged. Tad as anyone else, really. Stood outside a shop waiting for my wife. They called it loitering, and that was that.'

The Doctor leaned against the cell wall, crossing his legs. 'Sounds like I'm not the only one being brought in on rubbish. Is this common?'

Hendry nodded, his expression still tense. It's all they do, really.'

'What, and leave the thieves and murderers to run amok?'

Golligh just chuckled at this, which didn't answer the Doctors question. 'I don't know what's funny. Did I say something funny?'

'You're from outside the Keep,' Golligh said gently.

The Doctor nodded, pursing his lips and looking up toward the ceiling of the cell. 'A bit outside, yes.'

'There's not been a murder or a robbery in the Noble Keep for decades.'

'Even so, there must be something else that needs curtailing more than subconscious littering. Pickpocketing. Embezzling. Arson?' The Doctor raised an eyebrow, fixing Golligh with a keen look. 'Reckless driving? Payola? Larceny of poultry? I can do this all day, I've seen a lot.'

Golligh shook his head. 'That's the purity of the Noble Keep. We have only the smallest of crimes to contend with... and thus, the smallest crimes are the largest crimes, and are treated as such.'

'Ah, well. No matter.' The Doctor strode purposefully to the cell's one window. It afforded little more than a ground-level view of the capital, with shoes and wheels occasionally clicking or rolling by. 'We'll pay the fine and go home, eh, lads?'

The Doctor's cheerful assertion was met with silence. He turned around, still grinning, and gestured to the pair. 'This is where we all agree and have a good laugh. Like this, I'll show you.' He demonstrated the most cavalier laugh in his mental catalogue, the one he was planning to use when he jumped through windows into secret meetings (which he planned to do quite a lot more of in the future).

Hendry and Golligh did not join in the laugh. The latter continued to smile placidly. The former looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

'You can hear the laugh again if you need to,' the Doctor offered.

Golligh just shook his head. 'You're from outside the Keep, so you wouldn't know. This is it, young man. No trial. No plea. You're guilty as charged.'

'Fine,' the Doctor huffed. 'Not the first time won't be the last. How long for a parking violation? A week? Three days if I play nicely?'

Hendry laughed, but not the laugh the Doctor had demonstrated. It was tired and tearful. 'Life.'

'Sorry, what?'

'Same for him, same for me, same for everyone. Once you're in, you're in for good. Not a single criminal on the streets, no matter how small.' And again, but with an intonation far deeper than before: 'That's the purity of the Noble Keep.'

Suddenly, Hendry's breathless panic attacks were making an unpleasant amount of sense, and Golligh's passive pleasantries sounded less like a jovial friend in similar straits and more like a man who's simply given up. Then, Golligh's brow furrowed slightly. He opened his mouth hesitantly, as though weighing whether his next words belonged in the world.

'Unless, of course, you care to challenge the Gauntlet.'

The Doctor grinned toothily. 'I have literally no idea what that is. But I do like a challenge.'

* * *

Rue's lodgings within the Noble Keep were always ludicrously fancy, but Kennoh had gone above and beyond this season. (There was still a guard on the door at all times, though; that would never change.)

It was a suite at the top of the southern tower, high-ceilinged and circular. A series of arched windows stretched the height and width of the wall all around her, the transparent glass covered only by gauzy curtains the same soft lavender as the sky. There was no hiding herself as she changed out of her dusty attire into a plush robe — but her suite was effectively the highest-up liveable place in the keep. The sky was hers alone, prying eyes sequestered to at least two storeys below her.

A bath was drawn, sweet-scented and lukewarm to combat the seeping heat of the cart ride over. Purple lakeflowers spun gently on the tinted surface of the water. Cut glass bottles of lotions and soaps stood within reach on a nearby shelf.

It was a temptation. To give in before the Gauntlet, say the one thing that would absolve her without putting up a fight.

'It won't work on me,' she muttered at the water, undoing her robe, 'Not now, not ever.'

She did, however, have a long soak and wash her hair. She wasn't about to waste clean water. When she was done, she drained the bath, ran fresh water, and scrubbed her travelling clothes.

After she'd hung them up to dry, she had a snoop around the room. There was a dumbwaiter behind a wrought-iron door to deliver meals, but it was far too small to escape through. There were no sharp objects to speak of, and the glass of the wide windows was

curiously durable. With all these security measures in place, she was unsurprised to find a small cubical listening device hidden in a drawer. A pretty prison, indeed.

'Rue?' came a voice through the device. Ah, so it wasn't just for listening, after all.

'We both know this is ridiculous. You don't have to do this. Just say the word and you're free. No fighting.' She sat in stony silence, watching the cube flicker.

'I see... so that's how it's to be. Well, should you change your mind, someone will always be listening. They'll put you through to me.'

Rue wrapped the communicator in a towel and shoved it under her bed.

* * *

The Gauntlet, as Golligh and Hendry had gone on to explain to the Doctor, was a tradition dating all the way back to ancient Idrothan society. Once a season, each kingdom chose one prisoner in good standing — one who served their sentence penitently and without complaint, and who demonstrated adequate efforts toward reform — and entered them into a planet-wide series of difficult (but never deadly) elimination trials. Known as the Gauntlet of Absolution, these trials tested each prisoner's piety, work ethic, and devotion to their fellow Idrothan. Whichever single prisoner passed the final trial was granted a full pardon, as well as a small sum of money and goods with which to restart their lives. It got to the point that kingdoms vied for the right to host the Gauntlet each season, and thus housed the newly-reformed winner. The Gauntlet had run for centuries, and winners had gone on to become scholars, scientists, and great rulers throughout Idrothan history.

As the various kingdoms across Idrotha grew and changed, the Gauntlet was held less frequently, and eventually abandoned altogether. Some kingdoms decided more would be accomplished by devoting their time and resources to broader, more constant reform. Others had no prisoners they felt they could send in good conscience, and others still had no prisoners at all. In time, the practice fell off entirely. That had been two centuries ago.

The Doctor nodded as he slouched against the cell door with one booted leg cocked roguishly out, crunching loudly on one of the apples in their lunch rations. The meals were the bare minimum necessary for survival, it seemed, but at least they were fresh.

'Why bring the Gauntlet back, then, if everything's so great?' he asked when he sensed that the exposition had lagged into silence. He hooked his apple core at the cell's one tiny, barred window; it missed by a good foot or so, knocking against the wall with a squish and dropping onto Hendry's cot. The Doctor winced. '*So* close.'

'No one's sure.' Golligh shrugged. 'Especially considering the Noble Keep was the first to bow out of the Gauntlet; it's been peaceful for ages. Then things changed all of a sudden. One day everything was fine, the next people were being shuffled away for the tiniest of infractions.'

'Yes, well. You *would* think that, wouldn't you?'

'Eh?'

The Doctor hopped to his feet, retrieving the apple core. 'I mean... what was your name again? Garlic. I mean, Garlic, that nothing ever happens overnight, especially things like this. You just weren't looking because it didn't affect you.'

For the first time in their scant acquaintance, Golligh looked perturbed.

'Oh, I wouldn't upset yourself about it,' the Doctor scoffed. 'That's the way people are. It just means you're normal like everyone else, and not exceptionally clever like me. Do you think I can get arrested again for littering I'm already in here for life, so I expect not.'

Neither Golligh nor Hendry had any answer, so the Doctor reached through the window bars and placed the apple core delicately on the street outside.

'What are you doing this for?' Hendry asked.

The Doctor looked up at the apple core on the cobbles. 'Because I'm a rebel. I can't be stopped. Try and stop me, I'll litter again.'

'No, I mean... poking and prying into everything when it won't make any difference.' Hendry truly did look deflated. 'The next Gauntlet starts today, and it'll just be the same old story again.'

'And what story is that?' The bolt on the outside of the door clacked and turned. Golligh nodded toward the noise. 'I expect you'll get to hear for yourself in a moment.'

If it was a different guard from before who entered, the Doctor couldn't tell. They all looked similarly tall and square, with a helmet plopped in between their shoulders that may or may not have had a head in it. This one didn't have a weapon of any kind on him, but rather a bandolier of clear plastic cylinders, each of which contained a rolled piece of paper and a writing instrument.

The Doctor looked the guard over. 'Right, I think we can take him. Garlic, bash him over the head. Hendry, gnaw his ankle. I'll stun him.' He whipped out his spyglass and brandished it like a sword.

Neither Golligh nor Hendry moved. The guard didn't, either.

'Good, good.' The Doctor backed up slightly, folding up the spyglass again. 'You're right, play it safe for now.'

'I have been sent,' the guard said, with all the enthusiasm of someone who was scheduled to be doing this and nothing else all day, 'to collect entries into this season's Gauntlet of Absolution. Qualified for entry this year are. He looked down at a little pad in one hand. Bookson, Hendry... Millkeeper, Golligh...'

'It's pronounced "Garlic",' the Doctor cut in.

The guard levelled a weary stare at the Doctor — or at least, it seemed that way given the tilt of the helmet perched on his shoulders — '… and Doctor, The. Do you wish to tender your entry into the Gauntlet?'

Golligh shook his head and held up a hand, seeming to sink further into the shadows of the cell as he did so. Hendry hesitated, one hand slightly outstretched.

'I wouldn't,' Golligh murmured, but Hendry shook his head defiantly and strode forward, holding out a hand.

'Yes,' he said, his wobbly voice threatening to crack under the confidence he forced into it. 'Yes, I will enter!' Golligh sighed from his cot.

The guard looked to the Doctor expectantly. The Doctor shrugged and tutted, brushing some dark curls away from his face. 'Well, of course, if you insist.'

Hendry and the Doctor were each handed one of the plastic cylinders. The rolled papers inside were little more than narrow slips of paper, and bore only a line to be signed upon. Hendry scribbled his name down without question and shoved the paper back into its cylinder. The Doctor peered at it. Took his spyglass back out. Peered at it through *that*.

'In your own time,' the guard muttered.

Finally, the Doctor sketched down a signature with a flourish and handed back the cylinder. The guard slipped both into a small bag at his side, which already rattled with a few other completed 'forms,' and pulled the bandolier around a bit to bring more ready-and-waiting cylinders to the forefront.

'You will begin tomorrow,' the guard said gruffly, and was gone.

'Hendry,' Golligh chided gently from the bed. 'You know what could happen.'

'What? What could happen?' The Doctor looked between the two. 'I thought the trials weren't deadly. If we fail, we just come back here till next season, right?'

'True enough. I'm not worried what will happen if you fail.' Golligh's face darkened. 'However, I fear for your lives should one of you win'

* * *

The Doctor had felt rather clever as he approached the first trial, along with five dozen other hopeful prisoners. 'What's first, then?' he'd asked cheekily. 'Sweeping out the stables?'

'You've done this before, I see,' the guard grumbled, and thrust a mop into the Doctor's hands. As he stared at the mop head, the smell of his first trial wafted across to him. He tossed his hat and coat to the side and, head held high as though it would situate his nose above the stench, entered the fray.

'The first few trials are the same as the original Gauntlet,' Hendry remarked to the Doctor, scrubbing down a particularly caked corner with the longest-handled mop he could find. They were only an hour or so in, and nearly half the prisoners had withdrawn; apparently life in a clean cell was preferable to a day of *this*. 'This one never changed. Partly because it was believed to demonstrate true humility *and* true drive. Only someone serious about reforming their lives would be willing to debase themselves in such a way.

The Doctor scrubbed at the railings with one hand, holding a lacy handkerchief over his face with the other. 'So, the mythological similarities are just a coincidence.'

Hendry paused to rest his arms, either missing or ignoring the Doctor's observation. 'Plus, it was a task that anyone from any kingdom could comprehend — everyone's seen a mucky stable. There were progressively fewer such common touchstones as kingdoms began developing at different paces. I personally believe that's another reason the Gauntlet fell out of favour.'

'You make it sound as though you're writing your dissertation on it'

'Well, I am.' Hendry beamed; but the confident grin dropped as he recalled his situation. 'I *was* rather. That's all behind me. Not a lot of research or writing I can do now.'

'They won't let you finish it in chokey? It's not as if you're doing anything else.'

'Try telling *them* that.' Hendry nodded toward the guards on duty, standing a significant distance from the stables. 'That form we signed earlier is the first time I've held a pen in three seasons.'

Sixty-three prisoners entered; ten remained by the time the stables were spotless. The Doctor donned his hat and coat again, waving his handkerchief furiously in front of his face. Hendry had stuck it out, too, and the group of them were divided off into pairs and sent to inns scattered around the Keep for the evening.

The Doctor and Hendry had ended up paired together, but it wasn't the Doctor's doing. The young man appeared to have imprinted on him in their short time together, and refused to leave his side when the guards began dividing them into pairs. Eventually it was considered easier to let them be, and the two were shuffled off to a pleasant little B&B... albeit under heavy surveillance.

'So, how many trials are there?' The Doctor was digging into a small five-legged game bird, roasted with pink and purple carrot-like vegetables and some herbs he was

unfamiliar with, but fully intended to grab a handful of before leaving Idrotha. 'And why are we being treated so well all of a sudden?'

'As few as three, as many as twelve,' Hendry replied, tidily separating the many little drumsticks from his own bird. 'As for why we're being treated well... I don't know. In the old days, it was to inspire the competitors to keep fighting on for a better life. To remind them of what they were missing so they'd push harder to win.'

'Mm.' The Doctor carved off a bit of bird and chewed it thoughtfully. It was good. He'd have to ask for the recipe. 'Who's to say that's not still the intent?'

A guard came in shortly after to remove their dinner things. As he counted the cutlery, the Doctor sat mere inches away, peering through his spyglass. Hendry squinted at him in disbelief.

'Does that help?' Hendry asked once the guard had left.

'Yes, actually. Did you notice the little device on his belt?'

Hendry shook his head.

'Ah, see? No spyglass, that's why.' The Doctor tapped near his eye. 'It was a little cubic thing. I'm not sure, but it might be some sort of portable communicator. Depending on who's at the other end of it, it could be of assistance.'

'Fat lot of good it'll do us out there on his belt.'

'Well...' The Doctor reached into his jacket, producing a small, gently glowing cube about two inches square on a side, with a small chain attached to one corner. 'Good thing I got it off him, then.'

* * *

A sound awakened Rue with a start. Something muffled, like a voice underwater. It was coming from beneath the bed.

Quietly, she reached down, holding her breath as she removed the little communicator she'd placed there earlier. Free of its towel, the sound it was making was clearer: a man's voice.

'No, you pushed the button when you grabbed at it! I was just holding it!'

Rue turned the communicator over in her hands so the hair-thin antenna was pointing skyward. It vibrated gently, and the voice began coming in clearer, still grumbling about some injustice done. It didn't sound like a guard, and it definitely wasn't Kennoh. She'd know *that* voice anywhere.

She sneezed.

'That was a sneeze! That was a lady's sneeze, there's a lady listening! Hello? Hello, who is this? Who are you?' Rue glared at the gently glowing cube indignantly. Who are *you?*'

'I asked first.'

Whoever had the mate to this communicator, they sounded like they weren't meant to have it. Letting her guard down out of sheer curiosity, she answered. 'I'm Rue.'

'Oh...' The man's voice faded into thought. 'I don't know who that is.'

The connection was cut, and the cube's light faded.

* * *

'Rue,' Hendry explained the next morning, 'is practically a trial in and of herself. The second-to-last, to be precise.'

The guard apparently hadn't noticed the communicator was gone, so the Doctor declared it his and pocketed it. Well, is she, or isn't she?'

'What?'

'A trial. And if she is, what *sort* of trial? I'm going to have to deal with her eventually, I ought to know what I'm up against.'

Hendry stared at the Doctor in wonder, then laughed aloud. 'You really are sure of yourself, aren't you, Doctor?'

'I've not found a reason yet not to be.' The Doctor looked at Hendry expectantly over their breakfast, waiting until the boy realised it was his turn to speak.

'Oh. Erm. Well, Rue is from the other kingdom that still takes part in the Gauntlet. Deepfall, about a day's journey south. It was one of the others to retire from the Gauntlet early... though in their case it was because their prisoners were too violent to send in good conscience. The second-to-last trial is a fight to failure between Deepfall and the Noble Keep's top prisoners... and for the last several seasons, the first of those has been Rue.'

The Doctor chewed on this in silence. 'Fights her way up through ranks of literal criminals every season, then whiffs it against the kingdom's finest jaywalker? Don't believe it.'

'Yeah. Nor does anyone else. And yet, it's the same thing every year.'

'So, what's after Rue? Fame and glory and freedom?'

Hendry shook her head. The final trial. To prove your worth, You're sent on a mission for the Keep. I don't know what it is. It changes every season. I only know no one's ever returned.'

'Who's gone before? Anyone fun?'

'It varies. Some writers. Some politicians. A teacher or two. —That was part of my research, actually: trying to find some other link between them,'

'And?'

Hendry lowered his voice. 'Inconvenience.'

The ten remaining prisoners were gathered the next day and given their next trial: get out onto the streets and turn in a ne'er-do-well. A desire for absolution, after all, involved a willingness to guide others back onto the right path.

Two prisoners bowed out immediately. It was clear from their expressions that the task didn't sit right with them, and they'd sooner go back to their respective cells than subject someone else to an unfair punishment.

'This was never a part of the old trials,' Hendry whispered to the Doctor.

'Well, it is now.' The Doctor straightened the cuffs of his jacket and patted his enormous hat to make sure it was angled just right. 'So let's go out there and find a pair of roustabouts. One for you, one for me.'

There were no roustabouts to speak of. Very few people were even out; and the few that were kept very much to themselves, reading quietly on benches or strolling in silence. Even by the Noble Keep's stringent standards, it was a quiet day.

'I don't want to pull someone in for no reason.' Hendry dry-washed his hands like a nervous squirrel as he eyed the few visible townspeople. 'But if we don't bring someone back, that's it, we're out.'

'Hmm.' The Doctor tapped a finger against his lower lip, squinting around them. Tucked away under a low awning, he glimpsed a pair of men bundled up in ratty blankets. They'd clearly been at this a long time: they knew how to stay almost entirely out of sight.

'Result.' He beckoned Hendry along, crouching in front of the old men. They looked up at him blearily.

'Hello, chaps.' The Doctor touched the brim of his hat. 'Fancy a free bed and three squares a day? Fabulous view of the street?'

'Doctor, you can't—' Hendry found himself waved off.

One of the old men blinked, peering at the Doctor from under a pair of bushy eyebrows. 'Eh? Who's a square?'

'He's offering us a room,' the other said, his voice muffled by his blanket. Both men started to get up without question, but Hendry held up his hands.

'Look, if you must know... the Gauntlet is today, and we've been sent to find two criminals to put away as part of our latest trial.'

The two old men finished standing up... as far as they could, at any rate. One was bow-legged, the other had stooped shoulders. 'I don't give a damn if it's a prison cell or a gold-star hotel, bed's a bed.' He laughed like crackling paper. 'It's only a matter of time till they sniff us out, anyway!'

Hendry still looked uncertain, but the Doctor gave him a withering look, offering his arm to the bow-legged man like a young noble assisting his grandfather to the dinner table.

* * *

As Hendry slept fitfully that night, the Doctor lay on his bed, arm propped behind his head, chatting into the little glowing cube.

'So, tell me about yourself.'

'I don't think I will,' Rue's voice came back coldly.

'You don't have to worry about being overheard. We can only talk to each other over these now. I've scrambled the signals.'

'Have you really?'

'Probably... '

No reply.

'I'll tell you about me, then.' He twiddled the cube between his fingers. 'I'm dashing, charming, basically perfect... I've got a really great hat…'

'Handsome?'

'Extremely.' The Doctor looked out the window, piecing apart the unfamiliar star map in the Idrothan sky. 'I'm far too old for you, though. sorry to disappoint.'

'That wasn't why I was asking.'

'Besides, space is my mistress. The infinite sea of stars my one true love.'

'If I tell you about myself, will you shut up?'

She told him more than he expected to hear. Her voice was hushed, as though expecting someone to break in on their conversation at any second. A village, far from the Noble Keep, in the parts of Idrotha that were still mostly natural and untamed. A fire that raged the night of her sixteenth birthday, destroying all of it — her family, her few friends, the home she grew up in.

When the Doctor asked if it had been revenge that got her put away, she fell silent. And she didn't respond for the rest of the night.

* * *

There were only three left. Other than the Doctor and Hendry, only one other prisoner had managed to find an unwitting citizen to catch in the act of a crime. Now that third prisoner was standing before a trio of well-dressed people, pleading her case in a small, echo-y hall of a size more suited to a child's birthday party than a serious hearing.

'This was part of the original Gauntlet,' Hendry whispered as the Doctor stared at the scene through his spyglass, despite it being only a few yards away. 'But it was usually saved for last, and a public affair. The final two contenders offered a public penance and outlined their dreams for the future, and the audience passed judgment on who was to be absolved.'

The Doctor lowered his spyglass. 'Who are the suits?' He gestured to the three people hearing out the prisoner: two older women to either side, and a tall, steely-looking man in the centre.

'I don't know who the outside ones are. But the tall one is Minister Kennoh, the highest-ranking official in the Keep. He's the one who brought the Gauntlet back.'

'I'm sure people love him for it.' The sarcasm was lost on Hendry. 'There was a lot of pushback at first. But then it sort of... tapered off. Either people changed their minds or... well, I wouldn't like to say.'

The woman finished her argument, but was met with a severe motion toward the door. She sighed, shouted something rude, and stormed out.

'She must have angered them, somehow,' Hendry noted. 'That means it's just you and me now.'

The tall man — Minister Kennoh — raised a hand and motioned for Hendry to come forward. He clenched his fists and took a few steps... then stopped.

'Doctor?' He turned back around. 'I… I know you're not from around here. But I somehow get the sense that you're from very, very far away indeed.'

For once, the Doctor didn't quip back, his normally cavalier grin having given way to a surprisingly calm stare.

'And maybe I'm wrong, but I think you must know. I think you know what's happening. Why everything's got so unfair. And I think you might be here to fix it.'

'Do you?' Hendry nodded. 'It’s all a bit too perfect, isn't it? Arriving just as the Gauntlet was beginning, ending up right where you needed to be. Swooping in to save the day, like a proper hero.'

The Doctor's face remained oddly, forcibly passive — as though hearing the words poked at an emotion too complex for the room.

'So, er. Thank you in advance. And good luck against Rue.' And with that and a smile, Hendry strode up to Kennoh and punched him squarely in the jaw.

* * *

From a sporting standpoint, winning the third-to-last trial by forfeit didn't sit right with the Doctor. As he stood behind the large, barred door leading to the Keep's grand colosseum, jogging in place and stretching, he felt a bit let down. He'd had an entire speech prepared on the depths and horrors of his many previous crimes, and he wouldn't have another audience for that for ages. Ah, well. Maybe he could pop it in before the fight.

'Her left ankle,' a voice said behind him.

The Doctor looked over his shoulder at the guard behind him. 'Who's left their uncle?'

'Rue's left *leg*' the guard clarified as the barred door began to open. `She's weak on it.'

'Oh, that's a shame. Has she had a doctor see to it?'

The guard turned her spear, placing the butt in the small of the Doctor's back. 'That's the idea.' And she thumped him forward into the colosseum.

The Doctor stumbled forward into the centre of the wide circle, surrounded on all sides by cheering spectators and followed closely by his guard. Ah, this was more like it. He doffed his hat and offered a deep bow. The crowd went wild, as well they might. He flung his hat behind him, removed his coat, and flung that behind him as well. Both hit the guard, who made no effort to catch them.

'Ladies and gentlemen of the Noble Keep!' the Doctor shouted. 'I want crowd here today to lay before you the *many* and *varied* horrors of my —' The began booing. 'Steady on!'

But when the Doctor looked to the side, he saw why. A woman approached, tall and onyx-eyed and dressed in a leather tunic decorated with rows of small bones. As she walked, she tied her long, dark hair up behind her with a strip of fabric. Apple cores, bits of rubbish, and the occasional rock sailed past her from the hands of the gathered crowd, but her calm stride carried her safely through it all with what must have been seven seasons of practice. This, then, must have been Rue.

She stopped a few feet from him, squared up, already prepared for whatever came next. A beat later, a guard stepped to their side, rolling a cart of swords, maces, daggers, and other assorted weaponry in front of them.

'As returning contender,' the guard said gruffly, 'Rue of Deepfall may choose first.'

Rue smiled a tiny, territorial smile. 'I defer to my opponent.'

The Doctor rubbed his hands together. 'Very well, then. I choose...' He turned grandly to one side of the crowd. 'My *mind*!' Then he wheeled on Rue again, fingers pressed to his temples, as she pulled back slightly with a bemused expression. 'Yes, and well you may cower, for you have made your first mistake. We shall do a battle of wits! None has ever challenged my mental prowess and survived!'

'Something off the cart, mate,' the guard grumbled.

'Oh. Right. Of course.' The Doctor snatched a flashy-looking sabre off the cart. Rue, in turn, grabbed a pair of identical daggers, nestled side by side to indicate they counted for one item. She gripped one in each hand, a blue-white glint flashing off the sharpened edge of each. The Doctor raised his sword and slashed it down in salute; no motion was given in return.

'The fight is to first blood,' a voice called imperiously from the audience as the cart was wheeled away. The Doctor peered in the direction of the voice. Kennoh, as pointed out to him by Hendry the day before, sat on a balcony with a scattering of other people, a megaphone in one hand. 'May the most penitent soul prevail!'

A gong sounded the beginning of the fight. The Doctor fell into fencing stance as Rue sprang forward, forearms parallel in front of her, blades out. But instead of clashing with the Doctor's blade, she feinted to one side, missing his first swipe. He found his sword arm pressed between her two forearms, both daggers angled in toward his face. 'You don't mess about, you?' The Doctor flung his shaking Rue off, and turned quickly to re-engage. The twin daggers bounced off the sabre once, twice, then slipped as the sabre slid just past her ear.

'You're him,' Rue said evenly — not afraid, not mocking, just matter-of factly. 'Off the communicator.' She leapt backwards, but the Doctor kept pace.

'You never finished telling me your story, you know.' A swing at her left side, her right, her right again just to catch her off guard. She dodged all three with the same ease as she'd dodged the rotting vegetables. 'What are you in for? It's okay, you can tell me. We're fellow hardened criminals.'

Rue laughed, ducking the Doctor's next swipe and taking a swing at his shoulder. A slight snag on the waistcoat, but nothing else. Not if you're anything like the rest of them.'

'I assure you, I'm not. How's the leg, by the way?' The Doctor swiftly pressed in close on Rue's right. She darted left without thinking, her face crinkling in pain as she shifted all her weight onto the outer side of her left foot. But instead of taking the opportunity to strike, the Doctor grabbed Rue by the wrist and pulled her upright.

'What are you doing?' Rue's voice came out strained in her surprise.

'Keep fighting,' the Doctor said quietly. 'Make it look good.' He raised his sabre high. She parried with one dagger. He went low. She parried with the other. Soon, the two were chasing each other back and forth across the width of the colosseum, the crowd going wild enough to cover their conversation as they talked between clashing blades.

'This is a stitch-up.'

Rue laughed. 'What was your first clue?'

'Do you know what the final trial is?'

'Vaguely. I also know no one's come back from it' She made an off-rhythm jab toward the Doctor's face, just to show him who's boss; he ducked it with (disappointingly) little difficulty. 'I know I would if they didn't keep rigging the fights against me.'

The two pressed close to each other, Rue's daggers on either side of the Doctor's sabre as she leaned up to come eye-to-eye with him, the three blades forming a barrier between them.

The Doctor glanced toward the stands. 'Let's make it a draw.'

'What?'

'Force a draw. We do the final trial together. You get your freedom, and I find out what that Kennoh fellow is up to.'

They broke apart, sliding backwards through the sand. The Doctor pushed his hair away from his face and over one shoulder. Rue still stood taut, thinking.

'One condition.' She looked over at the guard still holding the Doctor's effects. 'I get to wear the hat.'

'*Come* on.'

'Yes or no?'

The Doctor sighed. 'Oh, fine. Go for the left side.'

The two leapt at each other, blades flashing, and slid past each other. As they came to a stop, a guard blew a loud, piercing blast on a curved horn.

'First blood!' shouted a man in the stands with Kennoh, looking through a long telescope on a precarious mount. 'The victory goes to... wait.'

The Doctor and Rue walked up to the stand side by side, each with a graze on their right cheek, welling slightly with blood. Rue raised her chin imperiously, locking eyes with the man in the stands. 'My opponent and I stand equally worthy, as you can plainly see.'

From here, the Doctor could see Kennoh's face more clearly. He wasn't an old man, but of an age where he probably fancied himself one. Strong-jawed and steel-haired, his face bore a brand of weathering that showed far more mental wear than physical.

'Do you concur, Doctor?' Kennoh's voice was oddly wavery, but the Doctor couldn't tell if it was due to the situation or if he came by it honestly. He gave the Doctor a pointed look, incredulous look: *Are you sure, man? Really? whatever you say goes.*

'I do indeed,' the Doctor insisted. 'Both my opponent and have proven ourselves worthy according to the measure set by the Noble Keep, and I would be shocked — *shocked*, say, and perhaps a little *disappointed* — to see the purity of the Noble Keep sullied by denying this young lady a chance at her own absolution.'

The storm cloud passing over Kennoh's face roiled even darker. The Doctor loved those looks: they meant he was winning.

* * *

'I cannot believe I have to share a victory with a frilly petty offender who's likely never seen a drop of blood in his entire life.'

The Doctor and Rue walked side by side through the wastelands extending west from the Noble Keep. Rue had taken her prize, and was proudly sporting the Doctor's enormous feathered hat. The Doctor, for his part, had finally removed his wig in the heat, revealing a scruff of short, dark hair. The single change managed to alter the Doctor's look almost entirely, and Rue couldn't help but think he looked like nothing so much as a schoolboy who'd found his way into his parents' clothes.

The effect was further accentuated by the Doctor jabbing petulantly at the tiny graze she'd given him during their duel. 'What do you call this then, eh?' He fanned at himself ineffectively with his wig. 'I said go for the *left* side. Now we match. Do you know how ridiculous that looks? Identical scars? I don't know how long it's going to be before I can change out of it.'

'What was your crime again?'

'Being amazing.'

'I *mean*,' Rue tried again, tugging on the brim of her new hat, 'what do you have on Kennoh? No one ever makes it to the final trial unless he needs to get rid of them.'

The Doctor regarded Rue out the corner of one eve. 'I'm new here. Literally just landed. He's never met me, has no reason to know me. I sent a message ahead requesting an audience, but that's all.'

'It's just, everyone else so far has been around long enough to do something. To make Kennoh angry, or to challenge him in some way. You've not written a book or said something out of sorts in public.'

'I promise you, I've done both of those at some point.'

'All I'm saying is, I'm pretty sure it's not petty crime everyone's being sent to their deaths for. But I can't be sure. I'm only there once a season.'

The two walked on in silence toward their goal. The final trial, as they were told in private by Kennoh, was a task in service to the Keep: something of great heroism and great risk. As the final independent kingdom on Idrotha, it couldn't rely on aid from surrounding nations. This time, the heroic service came in the form of ridding the Keep of a large sand-wyrm in a cave to the west. The beast had apparently emerged only a few weeks ago, endangering the sole route between the Keep and one of its few amiable neighbours. They were allowed to bring whatever weapons they cared to. Rue had switched to a pair of pistols and a pouch of ammunition. The Doctor had opted to keep his sabre.

'A friend of mine came here a few seasons ago on a diplomatic errand. Reverend Wei. After his initial message on arrival, we never heard anything back. I'm here to follow up.' The Doctor paused. Well, I *say* 'friend.' More of a co-worker.'

'Yeah.' Rue wrinkled her nose. 'You don't seem like you could maintain a friend.' Before the Doctor could protest, Rue's face lit up with recognition. `Wait. Reverend Wei. Small man, balding, surprisingly strong kicks?'

'That's him.' Rue gritted her teeth.

'Yes. I remember him. He ran the Gauntlet, too. Never came back from his final trial... something to do with a band of robbers, I think. Though that's how it tends to go. I fight them, they hit me where it hurts, head out of town, and no one ever sees them again. Kennoh declares them unworthy of absolution posthumously, and life goes on until the next Gauntlet.'

The Doctor frowned. 'And who's Kennoh to declare anyone worthy or unworthy?'

'Minister of the Noble Keep. That's apparently enough.' The bitterness in her voice hung in the air between them.

'Mm. That sounds like a history. Sibling? Parent? Step-parent Boyfriend?'

Rue cackled. 'If he had his way. He proposed to me my first season in the Gauntlet. Said I'd be "absolved" right there if I said yes.'

'What did you say?'

'Nothing. I kicked him in the shins.'

The Doctor grinned. 'Did I say I was too old for you? I may have to reconsider.'

'I'll kick *your* shins for nothing.'

The cave, they found, wasn't so much a cave as a hole — a very large hole, large enough to house a beast of horrendous size. The Doctor unsheathed his sabre as he approached the edge, looking down into the shadows.

'Right. Sand-wyrms. Not really my area. What do we know about them?'

Rue began situating her firearms. 'They're large. They're blind. They surface for food and will eat pretty much anything their tongue can latch onto... oh, and they haven't been seen on Idrotha in nearly a century.'

'A rare privilege to slay one, then.' With his free hand, the Doctor pulled out his spyglass and peered into the dark of the pit.

'You can't *possibly* see anything with that.'

The Doctor put the spyglass away again. 'I can see that apparently sand-wyrms can climb ladders.'

'What?'

He demonstrated by swinging himself over the edge of the burrow — but instead of falling into the depths, he began slowly scaling the interior wall, sabre clamped ill-advisedly between his teeth. When he was some distance down and Rue hadn't heard a cry of surprise, she followed. There were, indeed, generous hand-and footholds carved into the side of the rock, and the descent was surprisingly easy. The hole was about fifty feet deep, and didn’t widen especially at the bottom, but its sheer depth cast them in shadows, save for what little shone in from above.

By the time Rue's feet hit the ground, the Doctor was already zipping around with his damned spyglass again, sabre sheathed and forgotten. 'Is that really helping?'

'Yes, actually.' The Doctor handed the spyglass to her, and she put it up to her eye sceptically. She couldn't help but give a little gasp of impressed surprise. The view through the spyglass was brighter and clearer, overlaid with blinking readouts in an unfamiliar

alphabet, and there was a haze of thermal imaging over the walls. When she turned her gaze to the Doctor, even more readouts sprang up around him; though most of these were crossed out with a series of bright red Xs.

'Well? What do you see?'

'A lot of letters and numbers telling me there's nothing.'

The Doctor took back the spyglass and returned to his searching. 'Exactly. Which, if we're here for a living thing, shouldn't be the case. And there's no tunnel leading off into the ground — just that little opening in the wall there. This is all there is. You think it's gone off for a jaunt? Or maybe someone warned it the next round of dragon-slayers were incoming?'

'Well, it's had someone.' Rue looked down at the opening the Doctor had mentioned, barely big enough for a person to crawl into, and caught sight of a human skull sticking out. She picked it up and inspected it. It was riddled with holes: tiny, clean, perfect holes. 'These don't look much like teeth marks, though.'

'No, indeed.' The Doctor ran a finger over the holes. 'At my best guess, those are from energy weapons. But...'

There was a loud, metallic *clunk* as a door slammed across the opening of the pit. The little circle of light disappeared and plunged them into darkness, a sprinkling of sand sifting down over them. Rue heard the Doctor draw his sabre.

'If anyone asks,' his voice echoed, moving to her left, 'I knew this was a trap all along and this was part of my plan.'

A sudden burst of blue light illuminated the underground chamber for a moment, just long enough to show the Doctor and Rue each other's stunned faces in sharp relief. Something struck the ground by the Doctor's feet and sizzled. Rue immediately dropped, holding her newly acquired hat over her like a shield.

Another burst of blue light illuminated the area, and now Rue could hear machines warming up, buzzing to life, and see the faint glow of tiny blue dots covering the walls of the pit. She heard the Doctor drop to the ground.

'Crawl!' he shouted. 'Follow my voice!'

Rue needed no second bidding. She scrambled across the dirt on her belly, the Doctor in the lead, and the pair squeezed themselves into the little wedge of space Rue had noticed earlier. Just as both had made their way in, the light show began: dozens of lasers, criss-crossing each other in the darkness, striking the ground like a rain of bullets.

Illuminated by the strobing blue light of the lasers, Rue saw the Doctor cover his nose with a lacy white handkerchief. It took her a moment to realise why: the little alcove smelled terrible. And it was a smell she knew well. Sweet and rotten and foreboding.

'Don't look back,' the Doctor said.

'I've seen worse, I'm sure.'

'Even so.'

It was a good five minutes before the light show stopped. Rue's ears rang with the sudden silence. Slowly, the metal door over the pit creaked open, illuminating the dust particles hanging in the air. Then, slowly, starting at the far wall of the pit, the floor began to ripple toward them.

'What's that about?'

The Doctor nodded over his shoulder. 'Disposal. Hang on unless you want to make some new friends.' He gripped the lip of the outcropping above his head, and Rue did the same. The floor rippled under them — and would indeed have swept them into the pile of dead behind them had they not been hanging on.

Rue's exit from the pit was swift, but the Doctor's was notably slower. 'Go ahead,' he had said, handing over his sabre and pulling a tightly-folded piece of fabric from his jacket. 'Make sure the door doesn't close on me again.' And so she'd sat by the edge of the pit, sabre at the ready. But the door didn't close a second time, and the Doctor eventually emerged, preceded by a lumpy burlap sack. A gold medallion was looped around his neck, engraved with concentric circles and stars.

'Reverend Wei,' the Doctor explained as he removed the medallion. 'Archpriest of the Order of the Spheres. Would never raise his hand to hurt another soul. Well, except for the scrap with Harpo Marx, but we'd all had a drink.' His face was tired and drawn, devoid of any of its previous flavours of melodrama. He looked angry, properly angry, a sort of dim anger that knew it was warranted and didn't need to flaunt itself.

'There's no absolution, is there? Never has been. Just quiet disposal.'

The cold look in the Doctor's eyes didn't thaw as he spoke. 'Ready to head back to the Keep?'

'Why? Why not just run?'

'Two reasons. One, I need my ship. Two, and more importantly...' He grinned. Not his wide, confident grin of before, but a quiet secret of a smile. `This next bit is my favourite part.'

* * *

There was no protocol for returning heroes — there had never been a returning hero in recent memory. So, when the Doctor (with wig once again in place) and Rue arrived at the front gates of the Keep, toting a sack behind them, the guards weren't at all sure what to do.

'We've been absolved of our crimes.' Rue shook the burlap sack in one guard's face. 'We've brought proof and all.'

When neither guard budged, the Doctor heaved a sigh and pushed between them, shoving one of them aside by the shoulder as he did. 'You want to call. Kennoh out for us? We've walked a long way. And bring the lad Hendry up from the cells, if you would. I'll be needing him, as well.'

Kennoh did indeed arrive, flanked by various undersecretaries and minor officials. His party made a semicircle at the top of the Keep's central square, and several locals had piled in to see the novelty for themselves. The guard, in his confusion, had even brought along Hendry, who was ecstatic to see the Doctor's return.

'What is the meaning of this?' Kennoh demanded, his tone clipped, as the pair approached. 'You were given a mission.'

'We've been and gone. And now we're back.' Rue held out a hand, flapping her fingers expectantly. 'So, we'll be taking our absolution now.'

Kennoh chuckled. 'Impossible. The two of you, against a sand-wyrm? You'd be dragging yourself back in ribbons.'

'Oh, right. The sand-wyrm.' The Doctor paced around the square, spyglass in hand. 'I was really excited about that, you know. I had a great place for its head on my wall. But no ...' And now he turned to the locals, because really, they were the audience that mattered. 'What we discovered there was far more horrific, *far* more ghastly.' He threw a look at Rue over his shoulder; obligingly, she fanned herself with the enormous hat still in position, a hand to her forehead as though she might fall into a dead faint at any moment.

'We saw no monsters there, oh, no. But I'll show you what he did see.' And here, instead of unfolding his spyglass, the Doctor pressed it between his hands, folding it even tighter until it looked like an oversized camera lens. He lay this on the ground at the centre of the square and stepped back. With a buzz and a hum, the spyglass lit up, and — by Rue's reckoning — the whole group was transported back to the deadly pit.

There were cries of terror, and even Kennoh appeared rattled. But the Doctor continued pacing, at one point stepping through the pit walls and back again with ease. This was not teleportation, but a life-sized hologram. Rue realised he must have been constructing it, bit by bit, as he ran around looking like a little boy playing pirates. How much else had he stored away, then?

'An unassuming hole in the ground. Perhaps a nesting place for sand-wyrms once... but something else entirely now.'

And then (and Rue still wasn't sure how he managed this), everything went dark within the hologram, even under the Idrothan sun. Then the darkness was broken by the sight and sound of dozens of criss-crossing laser beams. There were screams of terror and the sounds of people hitting the ground. When the hologram dispersed, only three people remained standing: the Doctor, Rue, and Kennoh.

'You don't look surprised, Kennoh.' The Doctor raised an eyebrow, retrieving his spyglass. Not overly concerned about death lasers?'

Kennoh laughed as the gathered crowd began to pick themselves up. 'It's obviously a fabrication made to scare the good people of the Keep. I ought to have you arrested for disturbing the peace.'

'Ah, yes. The big crimes. Like speeding, or putting the bins out a day early.' The Doctor untied the burlap sack. 'Not, say, coming to investigate government operations. Or insulting you a bit. Or...' He reached in, pulling out a skull riddled with holes. 'Whatever this poor fellow did.'

The crowd reared back, just as the Doctor had hoped. 'Go on, Hendry, list off a few for us. I'll bet we can find them in here.' The Doctor gave Kennoh a covert smile. 'On second thought, why waste time?' And he upturned the burlap sack, spilling skulls and other remains across the square. Rue noted that he hadn't picked any of the squishier ones.

'That's a lot of old bones for a new cave, Kennoh. And all with the same injuries. One would almost think there *was* no final trial. Just a death sentence wrapped in a pretty bow.'

Kennoh choked, one hand flailing for assistance, but none of his underlings would take it. 'I… I...'

'I don't know if you use dental records on Idrotha, but...' The Doctor pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly overtaken with a fit of giggles as he looked down at the skulls. 'Oh, I hadn't even thought of that. I just brought them for effect. I've done you in for good, haven't I?'

The gathered crowd was slowly getting their wits about them. Maybe it was Hendry clueing them in under the main action, or maybe seeing it all laid bare was enough for them. But it took only a moment for the shouting and clamouring to begin as people — citizens, guards, even his assistants descended on Kennoh. But Rue squeezed between them, parting the crowd like Moses, to stand before her would-be fiancée.

Kennoh's look of horror broke into a weak, hopeful smile.

Rue kicked him in the shins.

* * *

'You know, you never *did* tell me what you went to prison for.'

The TARDIS was once again in the Doctor's control. Rue was exploring the interior delightedly, running her hands over every surface and tinkering with anything that wasn't nailed down.

'I'm sure I did.'

'You told me you remember your village burning to the ground on your sixteenth birthday. That's all.'

Rue nodded. 'Right. That's what I did.'

'You… burned your village down on your sixteenth birthday?'

'It was a *terrible* birthday. I promise, you'd have cheered me on if you were there.' The Doctor looked at the decorative bones sewn to her tunic.

'Well, ah. Where shall I drop you off, then?'

'Drop me off? I'm coming with you.'

'You can't come with me.' The Doctor busied himself with Reverend Wei's medallion, boxing it up carefully to take back to the Order. 'I have very important duties to attend to.'

Rue jerked a thumb at the door. 'Yes, and I helped with one just then, right? You were here to look for your friend.'

'Co-worker.'

'So I'm helpful. See?'

The Doctor regarded her grimly. 'I'd be harbouring a wanted criminal.'

'Absolution, remember?' Then, at the Doctor's continued hesitation: 'If Vou let me come with you, I'll give you your hat back.'

The Doctor sighed and held out his hand.

PAST LIVES
Lance Parkin

The Doctor sipped the y'bador, which was too hot, too sweet, left much too much of a sour aftertaste, and which he instantly fell in love with.

'Well, everywhere in the galaxy was affected,' the Commissioner replied. 'You say "untouched", but everywhere was *touched*.'

He sounded defensive. The Doctor smiled and nodded.

The closest sun was fully powered up now, marking local noon. That meant it was lunchtime, and that the hotel restaurant had become busy. It was a complex latticework greenhouse. The glass was stained red, purple and green, and gave everything a rather lurid look. The decor was mainly colourful vines and hovering glass panels. The Doctor wore a greatcoat and waistcoat and was somewhat overdressed.

He took another sip, looked around. The crowd was cosmopolitan, and it was entirely possible that no two diners were from the same world. He couldn't help himself, and didn't need his whole mind for his conversation with the Commissioner. It took him only a few moments to take in the whole room, then he shifted what he'd seen away from his conscious mind, gave the backroom boys a chance to take a look at it.

He returned his full attention, or enough, to his host. The Commissioner was a man with a prominent nose and swinging jowls, and receding hair. He made quite expansive moves with his hands when he spoke, swirling circles from the smoke of his cigarette.

'I'm not going to apologise that this sector didn't happen to be on the front lines,' he was saying, 'or that the Amalgamate needed fuel and ammunition to fight the Civic Legion, not sacks of tea.'

In his mind's eye, the Doctor saw a map of the whole galaxy, seen from above, an impossible gods' eye view, a million star systems linked by lines, parcelled off into distinct theatres of war. You couldn't see any planets at that scale, let alone the fleets or the people. You could only see the individual stars. Measured in those terms, Space War II had only seen two casualties, in the last week of fighting.

'What is done is done,' the Doctor said, 'and with the conflict over, the galactic community faces the challenges that happen in the aftermath of any war. Famine, disease, refugees. Except on a truly unprecedented scale. Wouldn't you agree that those worlds that ensured they were more... lightly touched by the fighting should more actively involve themselves in the peace?'

The Doctor put a thin paper file down on the table, and put his hat on top of the file for now.

The Commissioner knew the Doctor represented some powerful organisation or government, but not which one. He had the air of someone who was ex-military, but, then, half the population of the galaxy were ex-military. The Commissioner knew he was looking at a senior diplomat, an ambassador and had vague memories that he'd been presented with credentials about a week ago, that this meeting had been arranged — hadn't there been a hovering black orb about the size of his head that... and... but — as he tried to picture it he found himself on a hillside at night, tending sheep, and the Doctor was the Angel of the Lord.

There weren't hillsides, nights, or sheep on his world. His people's belief system revolved around the Green Fuse the sacred lifeforce that ran through plants, and only plants.

'Of course,' the Commissioner said.

The Doctor pushed over a folder. 'A refugee is a refugee. Your planet's ability to stay on good terms with both sides places you in an excellent position to help everyone. I have a plan of action that I suggest you might take up. You've heard of the Avab'oiram?'

The Commissioner thought about it as he put on his 3D reading glasses. 'They're... they breathe something odd. They're sort of insects or lobsters or something?'

'They're something of an outlier. Three hundred feet long, they can only exist in high-gravity worlds with dense radioactive cores, they breathe diamond dust, they have very, very slow metabolisms. The main cause of death among their people is erosion. Anyway, their planet was caught in the crossfire, they're converting a couple of moons into arks, that will take about nine years. Eighty years from now, those arks will be swinging by this way, and I thought it would really help out if you, yes, here —' he pulled out a diagram of this solar system re-engineered your eleventh planet to raise the atmospheric diamond content, upped the gravity a bit. Twentyfold, say.'

'Eighty years from now...'

'Yes, what about it?' The Doctor scowled. 'Plenty of time to prepare. Start now, you'll be able to spread the effort, have everything nice and ready. It's not like you're using it for anything. If you irradiated the core, that would be half the job done.'

'But... if we terraform Planet XI to provide a habitat that perfectly suits the Avab'oiram, and they find out, won't that be precisely what attracts them to this system?'

The Doctor drew in a small hiss of breath. 'Well. No. That would be cheating, wouldn't it? Completely violate the laws of cause and effect. I think when they show up, we'd definitely have to chalk it up to a staggering coincidence. Divine intervention.'

The Commissioner was flicking through the file. 'We don't have the resources.'

'It would take a sustained investment of one point five per cent of your annual economic production. It's all in the plan.'

The Commissioner stabbed at one of the pages.

'Where the Rot would we find a ball of radioactive material that weighs half as much as our planet?'

The Commissioner waited. The Doctor's face had fallen.

'Doctor?'

The Doctor was looking at something, or someone. The Commissioner followed the Doctor's line of sight.

'Ah. Ikayno G'yorst.'

'You know who he is?' the Doctor said, trying not to hiss the words.

The Commissioner nodded. 'Under the terms of the peace treaty, the —'

The Doctor closed his eyes, stayed calm, opened his eyes.

'Would it help seal the deal if I threw in the radioactive core?' he asked.

The Commissioner blinked.

'OK, not throw it in. Drop it in?' the Doctor offered. 'Gently?'

'I —'

The Doctor was flicking through his diary. 'I could fit you in Wednesday? Wednesday afternoon?'

'Next Wednesday?'

The Doctor smiled. '*Last* Wednesday.'

'Uh... yuh... huh?'

The Doctor finished his drink. 'Thank you. Now, if you'll excuse me...'

* * *

The communication screen took up the whole wall of the situation room of the President of Dattany. Everyone had got so used to the sirens and alarm bells that they barely noticed them.

This had been the first time the Doctor had seen their enemy.

Field Marshal Ikayno G'yorst's head was about twice as wide as it was long, and consisted of very little but edges. Small eyes peeked from under one limestone ridge, large tusks thrust down from another. It was a very elaborate face, offset by the almost austere charcoal uniform of the Civic Legion.

'— then, Madame President, you leave me no choice,' he was saying.

The Doctor was here merely to observe, and had observed the CL ship outwarping so it was in orbit directly above the capital city of this broadly peaceful world, then about an hour's worth of frantic negotiations as various evacuation and defence plans were all put into action. The fact that the Field Marshal seemed quite happy to grant them that hour to prepare was not lost on anyone.

Now, one of the larger bomb bay doors on the enemy ship had opened. Something was hovering in there. A tractor beam gave it a nudge downwards.

The President was beautiful, raven-haired, and the physical resemblance to his wife was strong enough for the Doctor to find it distracting.

'Metallic object. Cylinder. One hundred metre length, five metre diameter,' a technician recited. 'It's... dropping.'

Kinetic energy weapon, the Doctor thought. Why use anything fancy when you could just drop a solid weight on a city?

He was in the city. Somehow, he didn't feel he was in any personal danger. Perhaps because impact would be in two hours, and the TARDIS was tucked around a corner about thirty seconds away. Or possibly it was because the city was well defended. Its orbital, air and ground-based defences were already active.

'Laser grid active,' another technician called. 'Awaiting your command, Madame President.'

Everyone was pausing. Not relaxing, as such, but they'd been given a moment where everything was out of their hands.

The Doctor took the opportunity to peek at the telemetry of the object. He ran a couple of calculations, on the computer at first, but then checked the result with a little mental arithmetic.

'The mass is off,' he announced. 'It should weigh twice what this is showing, if it's solid.'

Now he felt a little uneasy.

'This could be a decoy,' one General was advising.

'It could be a test of our defences. If we give them everything we've got, they'll know where everything we've got is,' another General advised.

'They know that already,' the Doctor assured them. The first shot from the air defences was fired, a test: it punched a neat round hole in the metal. The second, third and fourth shots all did the same.

The technicians could reel off an account of what was happening, but there was no analysis after that. The Doctor took up position peering over the shoulder of one of them. The trajectory of the cylinder had been affected by being hit by all that energy, but not by much. It was still heading straight down, to all intents and purposes.

'Landfall at...' the technician trailed off. 'Thirty miles north of the city.'

'What's there?'

'Farmland,' the President muttered. 'Arable farmland.'

'No secret facilities? No weakness in the planet's crust at that point?'

A room full of shaking heads and shrugged shoulders.

'We'll still feel it,' one advisor said. 'There will still be a dust cloud. There won't be much mass lost on re-entry, it's the equivalent of a big meteor strike.'

'The defence grid was designed to destroy incoming meteors,' the President reminded them.

'Light it up!' one of the Generals shouted, or some similar military thing.

The Doctor was far more interested in the left-hand column of the tertiary screen on the technician's console.

The laser grid activated. Each cannon was capable of firing eight times a second and there were over a hundred cannons.

And all the Doctor could think was that Field Marshal Ikayno G'yorst knew that. There was an energy reading from inside the cylinder, one that was getting easier and easier to detect every time its metal shell was punctured.

The Doctor tried to account for this. Assuming this wasn't just a big dumb metal mass being dropped from a great height, what was it? landing craft? Not one where they expected anyone or anything to survive the landing. The cylinder wasn't a bomb. Was it packed with smaller bombs? Or just radioactive material? The cylinder was hollow, but that metal was thick, durable. The Civic Legion were more than capable of building something that couldn't be punctured by laser beams.

Distraction. Misdirection.

'What else is going on?' the Doctor asked. There was hesitation. 'While we're all staring at that what aren't we locking at?'

A couple of blanched faces and urgent sensor scans later, the conclusion was 'nothing'. There was still only one ship in the entire solar system; it hadn't moved, hadn't powered up weapons or transmats, or launched fighters.

The Doctor frowned.

The cylinder had been under constant bombardment, and now it was in the thicker, lower regions of the atmosphere, it was now tumbling over itself, spinning, pitching. But the point of impact was still almost exactly the same.

The defence lasers had hit it thousands of times, but mostly at the ends. The tips of the cylinder were now glowing. Partly from the friction of re-entry, mostly from the sheer amount of energy the lasers had poured onto them. But also... that energy from inside the cylinder.

This was a new type of weapon. New to the Doctor, certainly, not one used anywhere in this war so far.

It was only when one end broke off the cylinder that he understood. There was a moment of elation in the Situation Room, the belief and the Doctor also believed it — that the weapon had been destroyed.

Energy started pouring out of the shattered end. A jet of plasma, or perhaps just raw heat, and now the cylinder was a conventional missile. Except it didn't have any of the avionics or even aerodynamics of a missile. It shot through the sky, haywire, and now the air defence system was finding it very hard to lock on.

The inevitable happened. Seconds after it had become a missile, it found itself pointing downwards, powering towards the ground.

The laser defence grid was now doing an excellent job of shooting at where its target had just been.

The computer was predicting the impact zone now as ten miles from the city, in a little under two minutes. It was drawing up projections of the blast radius and collateral damage.

The Doctor calmly assessed this, as he'd been taught to. This didn't add up. why the energy source inside the cylinder? A concealed rocket to... destroy a smaller area than a chunk of solid metal would, but in a few minutes instead of a couple of hours? But... Dattany had been given an hour to prepare for an attack.

The various screens in the situation room now had video feeds of the falling object, which was drawing a straight line of flame at right angles to the planet's surface.

It was moving fast, the Doctor had to move faster, had to work this out.

He had it a moment before it happened.

The cylinder impaled the earth at an almost ninety degree angle, and when it landed among — towered above — trees, the full scale of the thing hit home. It was the size of a skyscraper. The front tip finally broke off when it hit bedrock. A second jet of plasma shot from it, hurling the cylinder back into the air like a missile from a silo. The metal frame of the object was intact, apart from the two ends.

The cylinder launched up again, then the two jets fought against each other, wrestled, with the metal tube jiggling and rocking, levelling out, both ends taking turns to plough into the ground. It looked like a dropped firework.

The cylinder propelled itself towards the city, tumbling chaotically, almost randomly. It hit one of the suburbs with the force of a hurricane, gouging out buildings and roadways. It kept going. The plasma jets that were pouring out of both ends were melting the structures the cylinder itself missed, or just incinerating the air.

It was travelling at hundreds of miles an hour, smashing, rolling over crushing, burning, everything it got near. It bowled towards the main bulk of the city.

The floor of the Situation Room was shaking like there was an earthquake, or like a tunnelling machine was boring its way in.

And the Doctor thought that the cylinder looked, from the video feeds, for all the world like a child's toy, left to clatter into building blocks. The sky was red. Expending the extraordinary forces needed to topple big buildings was slowing it down, but not by much. When one end got stuck, the other didn't, so the great jet would power it over the land, through anything in its way, until it was free again. That energy translated into towers, churches, residential blocks being twisted off their foundations, torn and flung into the air, each causing its own fresh disaster when it landed.

There was no planning or predicting the course, here. This was random destruction. The secondary effects were capricious. There would be some areas spared, some completely flattened then consumed in flame, then buried in rubble pouring out the sky.

What was abundantly clear, though, is that the cylinder was, and it could only be by complete chance, heading straight for the Presidential Command Centre.

'Impact in thirty-two seconds,' a technician screamed. The Doctor ran for the TARDIS.

* * *

The Doctor, in this incarnation at least, liked to have a plan. It didn't need to be complicated, or a secret, he just far preferred to have sat down first, come up with a simple course of action to match a situation he understood. He was perfectly capable of improvisation, but disliked it.

The Doctor's first instinct had been repulsion — he found he could not be in the same room as Ikayno G'yorst, and so he'd left. He was in the garden outside the restaurant, now. Ankle-high mist swirled around plants that could easily have been sculptures. Ikayno G'yorst was still inside, sitting at his table, reading a newspaper. He wore the light linen garments that most people who lived here did. His, obviously, could only be tailor-made.

The Doctor always had a little trouble translating into 'ago', but the destruction of Dattany City had been sixteen years in the relative past. Not much different for him, he supposed.

It had been one of the earliest atrocities of a space war that became notorious for them. Two great space powers both reliant on automation, and the main war aim on both sides had been to seize control of the master computers of the manufacturing facilities, replace their punchcards, and thus instantly convert the robot workforces controlled by those computers to their cause.

The usual strategy when industrial civilisations fought was to cripple their manufacturing capacity. Hit them in the shipyards, the production lines, the refineries, and — with much handwringing and sadness — the areas where the factory workers lived. Ikayno G'yorst had been the first person to realise that *this* war was the precise opposite of that. *Only* the factories and the supply lines to the factories had to be preserved. Anything else — the populations, the cities, the breathable air, anything with DNA for that matter — could be blasted away.

Ikayno G'yorst was the mastermind of bespoke genocides for a hundred worlds. He designed and had built scores of macabre weapons systems that defied every galactic law

on the conduct of war. Instead of amassing tanks and battleships, bombers and troop transporters, he built missiles that sought out lifeboats, he laid down airborne minefields, deployed anti-personnel weapons disguised as hospital ships. If his only invention had been the Herod drone, that would have been enough to condemn him, but it barely rated a mention in his file.

The atrocity on Dattany had lasted three days, left the planet as rubble. Except for the automated factories, which had been kept pleasantly far away from the population centres.

But what could the Doctor do?

There were circumstances where a discreet tip off to local law enforcement would do the trick. When local law enforcement was compromised, then there was always some authority up the chain that would be interested.

There was the very top of the chain, of course.

He looked up at the sky, instinctively, wondering if he was being watched. If *they* knew, or had known. Had they sent him here so that he *would* avenge the people of Dattany? It's the sort of thing they'd done before. The sort of thing the Doctor was really rather good at. If so, it would have been nice if they'd mentioned this at the briefing. Forewarned is forearmed.

The Doctor was quite capable of navigating a moral dilemma: what's done is done — he'd just said that to the Commissioner, hadn't he, word for word? — and killing Ikayno G'yorst wouldn't bring back any of his victims, rebuild any of their worlds. The Civic Legion had not just been defeated, it had been deracinated. It had not just been stripped of its military assets, its entire ideology had been burned away. Ikayno G'yorst had been on the side that was utterly defeated, and truth be told, when looking at the whole web of time, the atrocities he'd committed had motivated the forces who'd formed a grand alliance to defeat the Legion. Objectively, if the Civic Legion had moved more slowly and subtly, they'd probably have been in control of the galaxy a century or two from now. If they'd had a few less *monsters*.

But this particular monster had done all his harm, now.

Perhaps Ikayno G'yorst had kept in contact with some of his surviving colleagues. Perhaps that would be the pretext that allowed the Doctor to...

What? Do what?

In the world of time and relative dimensions, the idea of a 'pretext' was nonsensical tivas Yes, it would be good if he'd found G'yorst on some dark planet, plotting with his acolytes to unleash a new Legion on the galaxy. The Doctor night smack a few of them with his cane, leap for some all-important component of a new superweapon. Escape at the last moment as the whole enemy complex exploded behind him.

Ikayno G'yorst was an old man in the tearoom of a planet so out of touch with the rest of its galaxy that it managed to avoid being involved in a total war. He'd disappeared from history after the War.

There were those who hunted down war criminals. A hundred shattered worlds he could take G'yorst to where the survivors might take their revenge. One more death, he supposed. But sending him to die, the Doctor thought, would be an abdication of his... well, yes, he'd say it... his duty. If Ikayno G'yorst should die, the Doctor should kill him.

So... what? Poison his tea? Abduct him and drop him into the atmosphere of the nearest gas giant? (Well, he would be heading that way.) Mete out some poetic justice?

The Doctor hadn't been paying attention, and found to his surprise that the muzzle of a pistol had been pressed to the back of his skull.

'You abandoned us,' he was told. The woman who'd said it had a Dattanese accent.

He'd raised his hands. 'Yes.'

'And now I find you here, watching *him*.'

'You've come to kill him?'

'You haven't?'

'I didn't know he was here until a few minutes ago, Madame President.'

The Doctor risked turning around. The raven-black hair was grey, now. The resemblance to his wife had slipped away, but only a little. She was wearing a simple pastel blue outfit, loose clothes like the tourists wore. She wore the same blood-red lipstick she had when she'd been the leader of a whole system.

This was the first good look she'd had at him. His people didn't age, so he didn't look a day older to her than he had sixteen years ago.

'You told me you were a time traveller,' she said, 'and I didn't believe it. What are you doing here? Is this all part of your *observation?*'

'I find myself wishing he was dead,' the Doctor confessed, 'and in a position to kill him.'

'Join the queue,' she suggested.

'After that, how I picture this all starts to get a little vague. How were you thinking it would pan out for you?' he asked. 'Go up to him, make a short statement so he knows who you are, and that this is revenge, then shoot him in the head?'

'The throat. The head is armoured.' As she said that, she'd tucked the gun away, in the waistband at the back of her skirt.

'Ah, yes. Then what? That's the part I've been struggling with. That's where my own plan fizzles out a little. Personally, I was thinking of confronting him in his room. Perhaps make it look like an accident. But then what?'

`I have a couple of ways I might get offworld, and a long list of other Legion fugitives.'

'The police will get to you before you get to the spaceport. But I wasn't thinking about that, I was thinking about what his death would achieve. What difference murdering one old monster in cold blood would make.'

'Don't try and talk me out of it.'

'There is so very little there to talk you out of.'

'I work with what I have. A dozen contacts on a dozen worlds who feel guilty that my world was reduced to rubble, who pass me files and find me a ticket to the next planet. A pistol with a sixteen-year-old battery pack that can fire three shots before it needs recharging. A knife in my boot, for when I needed a fourth shot. Don't you think I know how empty this is, how futile? Don't you think I wish I could grab all of them, the whole list?'

The Doctor rubbed his beard, a sudden movement that almost had her reaching for her gun.

'What have you achieved?' he asked. 'Who've you tracked down? What did you do to them?'

'This,' she spat. 'just this. I have some leads, I've taken out a couple of messengers, a couple of facilitators, but this is the first time I've found one of *them*. The first time it's turned into anything concrete. The first one who doesn’t somehow know I'm coming and vanish into thin air.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Good.'

'Good?' She glowered at him. 'Don't you dare sneer and don't you dare laugh, and above all else, don't you dare try and stop me.'

She started to push past him. He grabbed her sleeve.

'My people have rules,' he whispered. 'Some of them simple, some of them not.'

'Well, *my* people died,' she hissed back.

'I can't change history,' the Doctor said. Tut I can work with it. How many vanished into thin air?'

'Twenty-eight. All senior officers, or officials, or... the worst of the worst. Allowed to slip quietly away.'

'People don't just vanish into thin air,' the Doctor said.

'You did,' she spat back. 'You abandoned us. You told me —'

The Doctor bristled. 'I remember what I told you. And I do not want to merely *observe*. Not this. I want to do something, and I had no idea what. And now I do.'

They both looked at each other.

'You are not my enemy,' she said.

'No.'

'He is my enemy.' She jerked a thumb back over her shoulder. 'So, you know what to do now? You're saying you'll work with me? You lure him away, I do the deed?'

'I had something more ambitious in mind. You say you have a list?' Twenty-nine names, including his. Descriptions of where they were last seen.'

The Doctor looked at her, fire in his eyes. 'People don't just vanish into thin air. But people do vanish. Come with me. Bring your list, that useless list of twenty-eight people.'

'You think you can find them?'

'Oh, I can do better than that. I think we can make sure they'll never be found. I think with your list and my time machine...'

She smiled, for the first time in a very long time. 'Him first. I go with you after we've dealt with Ikayno G'yorst. Him first.'

'No time like the present,' the Doctor said lightly. He hesitated. 'Although I have some pressing business here last Wednesday. How about then?'

'I don't understand,' she admitted.

'Then... observe,' the Doctor suggested.

And when she looked to where he was pointing, back into the restaurant, Ikayno G'yorst was no longer there.

VALHALLA MUST FALL!

Aditya Bidikar

Nimh lives. Nimh watches.

Time passes. Nimh exists, alone. She watches the ocean rise and recede in the space of a thought. She watches the little ball light the sky and the sky dim as it goes down. Since Nimh gained consciousness, it has taken her all of her time to understand that the light and the little ball are connected. They move quickly, and she has to concentrate to observe them, but she has since reasoned that one causes the other.

She begins to pay attention to other things that move quickly. Sometimes the ocean stands still, and it changes colour, and she feels a kinship with it. She directs her thoughts towards the ocean, but she doesn't know if it hears her.

She watches things grow on her. Sometimes they keep growing for what seems like a long time, and other times they disappear, or change colour. She wonders if some of them were living things that have now stopped being alive.

Some growths seem conscious, as if they are shaping themselves or are shaped by other minds. She has not found firm evidence of life apart from her, but she lives in hope.

Sometimes she focuses on one of these shapes around her, and tries to see movement she can impute meaning to. Is it a life growing in front of her, or an object being made? She likes these thoughts, because they make her feel less lonely than if she assumed everything apart from her was mere environment.

So, she thinks of nature as if it has life. She gives the little ball in the sky a name, and she begins to compose a song for it. She thinks of the song in the moments when the ball isn't there, pausing each time it rises, holding her secret, making her song in the dark.

And when she is ready, she waits for her pet sun to rise, and she sings to it.

She doesn't know if the sun heard, but she feels pleased with herself. She writes more songs and sings them to her world, covering it with her thoughts.

Once, among the objects surrounding her, she notices an odd little speck, which disappears even as she focusses on it.

She decides to wait, see if it appears again.

It does, and then again, and stays for longer. Sometimes she sees things growing around it, and she feels more sure than ever that something is being built.

The little speck becomes her project, and she wonders what it means. Her world trying to respond to her?

If it is alive, she thinks, *and if it can hear me, it should stay for three sun revolutions, then go away for two, and then return*.

To her delight, that is what the little speck does. She feels herself swelling. For the first time, she is in the presence of another mind.

The structure surrounding the speck gets bigger. Occasionally, Nimh thinks she can see a figure moving rapidly around it.

Sometimes it looks like the sun stays in the sky longer than always, but it is never long enough to be sure. As if it is trying to slow down for her, but it doesn't know how yet.

Then she sees the moving figure, and it doesn't disappear. Instead, its motion gets slower till she sees each movement it makes around the structure, climbing on it, staying in front of it, and sometimes she feels its attention on here. She wonders if this is the entity that created the little speck and the surrounding structure — is this the mind that communicated with her?

The little figure draws closer to Nimh, and begins to climb. It has a little stick that it moves from one limb to another that it uses to stabilise itself on Nimh's bulk.

Nimh can feel its movement on her. Unlike the ephemeral rustle of all other movement, this has weight, a firmness.

'Hello,' the figure says, and Nimh understands it. 'I heard your songs while I was passing by — or my ship did — and I had to come and visit you. One doesn't often encounter mountains that can think, and *sing*. I'm the Doctor. What should I call you?'

* * *

His landing creates a plume thick enough that I can't see the sky, or the rooftop I'm standing on. The dust gets in my eyes, blinding me.

He is here. He is on Earth, in New York. The Destroyer is here, the world might end, and I can't even see my family.

I call out to them. 'Rob! Anya! Can you hear me?'

'Captain?' Rob's gravelly voice — like rocks grinding together — from maybe ten feet to my left.

I stumble, reach out blindly, and Anya catches my hand. She pulls me to her and I hug her tight. My brother Jake uses his power to throw light upwards, and, through the dust, we can see the figure of the Destroyer — an alien godlike being, the last survivor of a previous universe — on the verge of destroying humanity to take over Earth. To use it as a ship to pilot in his dark travels through the universe.

And facing him, my family and I. The Captain and his Winsome Threesome. It strikes me what a cheesy name that would be to die under. Chosen in a more innocent time, before perpetual Armageddon, when we had infinite possibilities. We were kids when we started — when we took that first journey to the Earth's hollow centre that gave us our accursed powers.

All that stands between the Earth and its annihilation is the four of us, and Gargantua — the weapon Jake and I cobbled together after studying the Destroyer's

anatomy while it traversed the solar system on its way to Earth. We created it as a last resort, and if it works, Anya has calculated there is a two per cent chance it will take the Earth and us along with our enemy. Can we risk it?

The Destroyer's voice booms. 'IT IS TIME.' Rob holds up Gargantua in his craggy but powerful arms. There is a noise behind me.

I turn and see someone standing at the door to the rooftop. A slim figure with curly hair and arms folded, looking oddly calm in the face of destruction.

'Rob,' I say. 'Just a sec.'

The stranger waves me back towards the task at hand. 'I see you're busy. We can talk when you have a moment.'

I look between the stranger, who no one else seems to have noticed, and the Destroyer. Rob waits impatiently for me to give him the command.

And before anything else can happen, the Destroyer strikes.

The world ends.

* * *

Galaxies away from home, breathing alien air, I hang a hundred feet above the fray, my wrists tied behind me in unbreakable chains, my feet in clamps, upside down as I watch the fighting beneath.

It has been ten years since the last Nightmare War. Ten years since the strange chittering creatures with goblin faces and dragonfly wings showed up through portals, wreaking havoc on Earth and turning anyone they bit into lumbering zombie creatures. It was right before our wedding, when Anya admitted to me that she was only half-human (on her mother's side), and that she had escaped her home planet to come to Earth.

This time we followed them back, my family and friends, and I'm trying to escape and join the fight. Somewhere else on this planet, Anya faces her father, the king of this land, as he tries to get her to betray us and make our marriage null and void.

I've already broken two bones in my hand, which has made it easier to slip the chains off, but I might need to break another.

'Captain,' a voice says above me. 'I don't suppose you've noticed how life always teeters on the edge of destruction, how everything is live-or-die, and somehow, you're always saving the world?'

I look towards my feet, and there is a figure leaning out of a window, face resting on one hand, elbows against the wall.

'Pardon me?' I ask. 'Why aren't you down there fighting?'

'I'm not part of that story, Captain. You and I, we're in a different one.'

'I'm afraid you've lost me.' I let my head hang back down and focus on breaking one more bone in my hand. This person is an irrelevance.

'Captain,' the stranger says again, 'I've followed you for a while now, and you never remember me. It's frustrating holding a conversation with someone who forgets what you said before you've finished speaking.'

I pause in my exertion. 'That,' I say, 'is because I don't actually know you.'

'Of course you do.' An almost-cherubic smile. 'I'm the Doctor. I'm here because I'm your friend, and that's what friends do — they help one another.'

'You can help me out of these chains, if you like, or you can leave.'

'Here's what I'll do.' The Doctor reaches down, holding on to the window with a walking-stick, and touches my forehead.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'That should let you remember me next time, and we can have proper chat.'

Crack. There, I can free myself now.

I look back up and nobody's there. My forehead tingles from that touch, but I don't feel any different.

The pain as I pull my hand from the chains is excruciating, but I chew my lip and pull through. I hang on to the chains, and swing my legs free — at least the Doctor helped me with those before leaving.

I take aim where the fighting is densest, and I let go. The battle swallows me whole.

* * *

In the depths of Rajasthan, in the wasteland between Jaisalmer and Jodhpur, there lies a hidden oasis kingdom that isn't part of India, and has never been.

The principality of Rajmera didn't cede to the British, instead cloaking itself with magnetic technology developed by their ancient scientists. They have used the last few centuries to further study magnetism, and my family and I finally came upon it when the prince — a quiet fellow-student with whom I had a friendly college rivalry — needed Anya's help in solving a mass levitation problem.

Today, though, we are here because Rajmera is under threat from the undead hordes of Resurrected Albion. The prince - Rana Jaisingh the Third - has asked us for our help.

'I give them about twenty minutes,' says the prince. 'The forcefield should hold for a while, but we should greet them at the city gates rather than letting them reach the fortress.'

Rob and Jake are testing the pulse weaponry we will be using in our to connect fight. Anya is huddled over our interstitial communicator, trying with other heroes who might be able to help.

'Twenty minutes should be enough,' says the Doctor.

The... Doctor? I whirl and see the same figure standing in the doorway, leaning on the same stick.

'I remember you,' I say.

'Finally.' The Doctor beckons me away from the others, into the next room.

'Who are you? Why can't anyone else see you?'

'Like I said, Captain. This isn't my story. What do you remember last before you came here?'

'I remember being on Anya's home planet, fighting the...'

'The Nightmare Horde. Yes, and how did you get here afterwards?'

'We… flew?'

'Where from? Did you go home before you came here? Did you take a commercial flight?' Looking more amused than actually curious about my answer.

'I don't remember.'

I look back to where my family is preparing to go to war. They haven't acknowledged the Doctor at all.

I clutch a proffered arm. 'Where am I? What is happening?'

The Doctor pats my hand. 'It's a story, Captain. The kind of thing you tell at a bar when you're old. Life with all the boring parts taken out. "And then this happened," ad infinitum.'

'But... this is *my life*. Anya, Jake, Rob, all of this.'

I must look anguished, because when the response comes, it's unwontedly diplomatic.

'It is, Captain. It is your life. Except that you lived it a long time ago, and you're stuck in repeats. A little of this, a little of that, bigger and better, but never anything new.'

'You knew me, before this?'

That smile again. 'Of course I did. You're a legend. We've even travelled together. Sometimes for your stories, and sometimes for mine.'

'Then what happened? How did I get here?'

'Someone made you an offer. They're called the Outsiders. They told you that you could live forever, as long as you gave them what they needed.'

'And that was...?'

'Thrilling adventures, Captain. The kind you always wished you could have — but forever. Contract binding till your death, which would be... never.'

'That doesn't... that doesn't sound so bad.'

'But it's not *real*, Captain. This life, it is *all* big moments — with none of the living in between.'

I call to Jaisingh, in the other room. 'How much longer?'

'Ten minutes,' he says. 'The city has been evacuated into the fortress. It'll be just them and us.'

I turn to the Doctor, who's looking at me quizzically. `You *say* you're a friend, Doctor. But I think there's more to this you're not telling me. Why are you *really* here?'

The Doctor turns away. 'I can't lie, Captain. It's not just you. They made the offer to others — people who are... past their prime.'

'Here's how I see it, Doctor. You seem to think there is a problem, but there's nothing actually wrong here. We made our beds, let us lie in them. You should mind your own business.'

The Doctor smiles. 'I was never good at that, I'll admit.'

Anya pops her head around the door. 'Time to go, Captain.'

'Have you met the Doctor, Anya?' I ask.

She looks in the Doctor's direction, and I can see she's confused. 'Was the palace doctor here? I didn't see him.'

'Never mind,' I say. 'I'll be right there.'

I walk away from the Doctor, following the Rana and my family towards the battle. The Doctor doesn't follow me.

* * *

The sun is about to dip below, the horizon. There's still heat in the sand, but there's a wind all around us, and I watch Anya pull the hair from her face, and smile at how it whips right back.

I clench my toes in the sand to ground myself, and I squeeze Anya's hand. I try as hard as I can to believe in the lie

Something will come along soon enough to destroy the peace — it is the nature of where we are – but for now, I make the best of this moment, lying on a beach with the love of my life.

The Doctor appears then – blocking the sun.

'I'm sorry, Captain.' An apologetic shrug. 'I have to keep trying.'

'No,' I shout, getting up and walking away from the Doctor. 'You're not doing this to me.'

'Anything wrong, dear?' Anya pipes up from behind us, curious but not disturbed at my apparent anguish.

'You have to trust me, Captain,' the Doctor says, striding to keep up with me. I turn around and we almost collide.

'*Why* do I have to trust you, Doctor? You're hiding something from me, and you want me to throw away a perfectly beautiful life for —'

'It's been ten thousand years, Captain,' the Doctor says.

'What?'

'That's how long you've been here. The things they've done outside...'

'I don't want to hear about it, Doctor! I don't *care* what they've done outside. I *deserve* to be happy.'

A flash of anger passes over the Doctor's face. 'And this makes you happy? I know you, Captain, and *not caring* is not what you do.'

I sit down, and look back at Anya in the distance. She hasn't moved at all from where she sat. She's running her fingers through the sand, watching the sea.

'I figured out why I made my choice. *The only way* I could've made this choice. They're all dead, aren't they?'

The Doctor pretends not to understand.

'Who do you mean?'

'Everyone I ever loved. My companions. *Anya*. There is no way I chose this over the real world if they were alive. Everything I *truly* cared about — it was already gone before I made my choice. Isn't that right?'

The Doctor hesitates, and then nods. 'And you should've told me this. How old was I when you last knew me?'

'Older than you liked.'

'And *that* is what you're asking me to go back to.'

'The Outsiders — the people who offered you this choice. They're immortal, Captain. They've conquered entire planets and systems, and everyone on those worlds is jacked in to the thrilling adventures of the Captain and all the other heroes like him, just so the Outsiders can feed off the energy that generates — so they can feel *something*. They're going to take over the entire universe if we don't stop them, Captain.'

I look inside myself, and I feel no regret. 'You're going to tell me it's my fault.'

'Of course not.' A shake of the head. 'I would like your help, though. Everyone I can bring out is another person they have no power over.'

'And if we leave this system, wouldn't I be ten thousand years old? Wouldn't I just be dead?'

The Doctor smiles. 'Would you believe me if I said I had a plan?'

'No, Doctor. I would not.' That wipes away the smile.

I hear a shuffling, and I see Anya running towards us. 'They're here, Captain. They're here!' The Doctor and I turn, and we see a massive roiling vortex opened up in the sky.

'It's my father-in-law,' I explain. We keep telling him — you can't invade Earth every time you're angry at us.'

'Nothing I can do to change your mind, Captain?' asks the Doctor.

'Next time you want to come meet me, it better be to make me forget all about you.'

* * *

Nimh speaks. Nimh listens.

The Doctor, in that brief visit, opened the world up for her. Nimh learned that she is made of rock — the same substance that forms her world. That she is part of the environment, and that there is other life on her planet. Life that moves like the Doctor, and evolves, and dies.

The Doctor told Nimh that she lives at a different scale of time than the rest of her world. There are creatures that come to life and die in the space it takes for her to form a thought.

But other creatures, slightly longer-lived, had heard her songs, and taken them for acts of nature. The vagaries of their world.

Could I speak with them? Nimh asked the Doctor.

'You might have to work for it,' the Doctor said, 'but I'll teach them to listen'

Is there anyone else like me?

'Not that I know of, but it could simply be a matter of time. life occurs in the strangest of ways. The universe needs life, so it can look at itself.'

I was inevitable?

'Perhaps,' the Doctor said. 'But since you are here, it felt unfair that you should be alone. Everyone should have friends.'

That was the last thing the Doctor said to Nimh, before waving her goodbye.

Nimh speaks, And they gather around her, the creatures of her world. She can feel them skittering all over her bulk. She tries to slow herself down, and she feels she can almost talk to them.

Years pass, and they begin to worship her. They hold rituals she doesn't understand, though there is one that amuses her, in which they try and stand still for as long as they can, so their mountain goddess can see them.

And when they grow old, they come to her and climb on her body and nestle in her crannies to. As they die, she absorbs their bodies, and with them their minds. Their memories, their lives.

It's all alive, she realises. The people, the land, the forest, and all their creatures. Everything is like her. She spreads her mind out into the world and thinks her way into the rocks and the mountains. There. All of them will live on inside her. None of them will pass as long as she remembers them.

Species die and species rise. Nimh contains multitudes, and parts of her can think and perceive the world at different speeds. She can speak directly to her creatures if she needs to, but she finds, like a wise mother, it is better to let them make their way.

She divides her consciousness in the land, and sections them into their own entities — her children. She retreats to her old haunt, and leaves these children to care for the others, waiting for them to pass, so she can assimilate and remember them.

Let them live their lives, and let them die, so they can live on inside her.

Their lives and deaths have meaning in her remembrance.

* * *

I am a God of Fire. I am bonded with a being of immense power. A god from another world, he was cursed by his immortal clan to live a mortal life for a whole year every years. Each century, he chooses a new person to be bonded with, a new champion.

I had become friends with him in his original form, and I volunteered to be his Earthly avatar. I have only to strike my wristbands together to summon him. He replaces me physically for that time, but he and I can still converse, and I have helped him navigate a modern Earth he is unfamiliar with.

Tonight, under a storm-laden sky, we face his mortal enemy. From the twin planet of his world, a demonic being, also bonded to a human. This time' it has taken over Jake, my adopted brother.

The Fire God and I have tried to keep the demonic creature at bay, to protect my brother, but tonight, the Fire God makes the case for striking the final blow, as I berate him for being willing to kill my brother.

I can't forget the Doctor's words, though, and I feel like I'm playacting, when the actual danger is elsewhere. If all I do is bounce from climactic choice to triumphal moment, does my life have meaning, or is it a constant whirlwind of novelty that carries no weight?

I wish the Doctor was here, and I could ask that question of the only other real person in this world.

The Fire God notices that I have fallen quiet. We stare up at the thunderous sky, and wait for the scheduled doom to arrive.

* * *

I hang in space, before the Source. Underneath me is the motorcycle Anya and I cobbled together using Rana Jaisingh's magnetic technology. The first motorbike in deep space.

In minutes, a passing cargo craft will devour me and carry me where I must go. But for now, I wait for the story to catch up.

The ship shows up in time, materialising next to me.

The Doctor opens the door, leans against it, arms folded.

'Captain...'

I raise a hand for silence.

We both turn and look at the Source. A vast face in the void — tens of galaxies wide. A consciousness bigger than anyone can imagine. It takes millennia for it to blink. For my entire life, its eyes have been closed. There is a star dying in its right cheek, creating a bright red pimple.

'I have been here before, haven't I?' I ask. It's been a long life, but this I know. The Doctor stays quiet. 'I guess you do become numb when you keep going for so long. How long has it been, you said?'

'Ten thousand years, give or take.'

'I brought Anya here, once. She asked me how close we'd have to get for it not to be a face anymore, the answer was… not very close at all. I wonder what manner of thoughts it thinks.'

'There is a theory that it is the face of another universe, observing this one.'

I turn to look at the Doctor. 'Not technically wrong. She was the Destroyer's spouse, in a previous universe. There was a collision We failed to prevent, and she gave birth to this universe, and he became... what he became.'

'Where is Anya?'

I sigh. 'We're going through a rough patch. She's back home, with her father, and I decided to wander the universe for a while.'

'Was it because of...'

'No, strangely enough. Nobody notices that I've been acting different. It's as if they're running their lines whatever I say. I'm a character playing a designated part, and the story moves on regardless of what I need. I live with the ghosts of my life.'

'I'm sorry about that, Captain. As promised, I'm back here to fix it -make you forget.'

'I don't think that's good enough, any more.'

'Pardon?' A wisp of a smile suggests feigned ignorance.

'You know what I mean, Doctor. You win. Don't gloat. It's unbecoming.' Hands held up, the Doctor makes a game effort to hide the satisfaction.

'How do we leave, though?' I ask.

The Doctor points at the Source. 'You just told me. This is the root of the system. We save her, we don't have this universe. The contract is void.'

'And how do we do that?'

'The story reacts to you, Captain. It'll take you where you need to be next.'

Before I can reply, a shadow falls upon us. The craft I knew was coming.

'I need to finish this one first, Doctor.'

'I'll see you in the next one, then. It's good to have you back.'

With that, the ship's door closes, and both ship and pilot disappear.

I watch the mighty visage in the void and wait for the story to consume me.

* * *

At the edge of the known universe is the wormhole that will take me where I need to go. I rev my bike, take a deep breath of compressed air, and dive in.

I emerge above an alien world, in the universe before the universe.

The Doctor is waiting for me.

Below us is a small farm in the midst of a desert. In the yard sit two alien figures, humanoid but not human.

'Is that them?' the Doctor asks.

'Yes,' I say. 'The man who will become the Destroyer and the woman who will become the universe.'

'What happens here?'

I point up into the sky, where a bright ball of primordial fire heads towards the little homestead.

'Then let us go,' says the Doctor. "You can carry them behind you. That should do it.'

'No,' I say, putting my hand on the Doctor's arm. 'I remember what you said. The contract is binding till death. If I save them, this will just turn into something else, and the story will continue. It's a revision, not an ending.'

'What do you mean?'

I turn my bike around, facing the oncoming meteor. 'I have my choice to make, Doctor. And I can't leave it to chance.'

The Doctor's confused. 'Captain, you'll *die*. And I don't know what happens after that.'

'Neither do I, Doctor, and that is the point. If you embrace change, you must embrace the unknown. If you can predict what's going to happen, it's not really new, is it'

I reach out and shake the Doctor's hand. The Doctor looks at it, uncomprehending.

And watches as I take aim at the end of the universe.

Beneath us, the would-be Destroyer and his inamorata live their lives, unaware of the epic that meant to take them over. Is it better to live a small life or to die and to give in to something bigger than yourself?

I spare them the choice, and instead, become one with the universe.

* * *

I sit alone outside the alien bar, in an orange night with two moons in the sky.

The Doctor doesn't know it, but this is where the Outsiders accosted me. I can remember it now — how I sat on this log, drinking myself into a stupor from a stolen bottle of alcohol, having been thrown out of the bar for disorderly conduct. When I started the fight, I just thought of it as teaching the `young 'uns' a lesson, but I think of it now, and I wince.

I toss the bottle away and assess the goods. Both arms replaced by robot prostheses — perfectly capable, even more than my old hands, but I miss feeling the winter chill raise goosebumps on my flesh. One bionic eye that I can command to turn into a data search engine or a telescope or... whatever I want. Since I'd last met the Doctor, I'd had a spine replacement using a lightweight alien metal. But even now, I need to sit with one leg stretched out because my hip hurts otherwise.

Worst of all is the weight of it. A hundred and twenty years of life lying heavy on my bones. When I was in... wherever I was, my body felt weightless, lithe and infused with power, as did my life, running like a dream from one adventure to another. This is real, and it's grimy. Worn out.

But still, we make our choices. So, I wait. For the Doctor, or for the Outsiders. Whoever shows up first.

The voice behind me, when I hear it, is laden with sadness. 'I hadn't realised how old you got. I'm sorry I made you return to this.'

I turn, and its owner is standing there. 'Bet you're glad I’m alive, though,' I say.

The Doctor nods, and smiles. I can see it's a struggle.

I heave myself up onto my feet — one bionic, the other still human. 'A hundred and twenty doesn't look as pretty in human years as it does on someone like you, Doctor.'

The Doctor reaches out to shake my hand, but I pull my friend into an embrace.

'They didn't come at all this time,' I point out as I let go. 'I thought I’d get to say no, and we'd have us a nice little fight.'

'I think they realised what you did. Probably the first anything like that.'

'What now, Doctor? How do we fight them?'

The Doctor pats me on the shoulder. '*We* don't, Captain. You should go back home, to Earth.'

I chuckle. 'Earth hasn't been home for a long time. Not since everyone I know died. As sad as it has been living among ghosts, Doctor, it was sadder to live without them.'

'Rest, then, Captain. I'll go and rescue the others.'

I take a pair of gloves from my coat pocket and put them on. It will be cold in outer space.

'Not everyone will capitulate as easily as I did, Doctor. Not everyone has the fortitude. There's only one thing to do. Take the fight to the enemy. This is early days, right? They haven't captured the universe yet.'

'They have not, indeed.' The Doctor thinks on this, looking into the sky. 'Maybe we can find a way to talk them out of it.'

I shake my hands to get some warmth into my fingers, and I look around for the Doctor's ship.

'Fine by me,' I say. 'You do the talking, I'll do the fighting.'

* * *

Nimh sleeps.

She finds herself sleeping a lot. She misses years of her world, but there is less of it now and it doesn't matter as much.

Parts of her are still spread over the planet, looking out for changes, or new life. But there hasn't been any in a very long time, and they hibernate with her.

All the lives that have been lived on her world are now inside her alive only in her memory. Life is now a solitary conversation.

But she was alone once, and she can be alone again. At least now she has the rest of herself for company, a bigger life than she started with.

One day, she wakes up to see the Doctor waiting. The part of her that is still a mountain recognises her friend.

'Hello again,' the Doctor says. 'I came by to see how you were. I thought you could use the company.'

Thank you... Doctor. I have been... alone.

'Yes.' The Doctor wants to continue: *and no one should die alone.* But says nothing.

Sitting on Nimh, the Doctor lays the walking-stick down near to hand.

I have been... alive... for a long time. But I had... something to look... forward to. Thank you... Doctor.

The Doctor waves a hand, as if to say, *no trouble*.

'I've always felt that life is the universe looking at itself. And life is meaningless without change.'

So you said... to me... a long time ago.

'Ah,' the Doctor says. 'You remember.'

The Doctor picks up the stick and twirls it.

'There was once a young species,' the Doctor tells Nimh, 'living on a young planet. There came a time when they discovered the secret to immortality. Not knowing any better, they used it became immortal. And their lives, you see, lost all meaning to them. It happens every time — death gives life meaning. So they decided to live on borrowed meaning — from other, mortal lives.'

'They waged war on the universe. But they found it no fun, since they kept winning — being immortal, that is. They had to find new ways to create meaning. And these

methods were cruel, because they were created by a species that did not know death, and did not know what it meant to everyone else. They kept plugging these mortal lives into templates they understood, and know what it lived on stolen meaning. And if nobody had stopped them, they would have turned the Universe into a pale imitation of itself, where nothing new ever happened.'

The Doctor lies back, head resting on hands.

'But there is another story. When the young Species was about to discover the secret to immortality, someone came and talked them out of it. This someone connected them to a mind that had lived far longer than them, and showed them what that life would look like. How vast it was, and how big a mind it required. This mind remembered that decision for them one until day, they didn't think about it any longer.'

And eventually... like all other life... they died.

'Yes,' the Doctor says. 'And I made that choice. Did I do it wrong?'

Nimh consults within herself.

No, Doctor. You were... not wrong. They... made the decision. You simply ... showed them... what they did not know.

The Doctor sighs. 'That's a relief. It is a big thing to decide on someone else's behalf.'

It is.

'And how *did* they spend their time, I wonder?'

Well... enough. Nimh's thoughts are at an ebb. *Gently.*

'So,' the Doctor says. 'Tell me. How was it? How was life?'

It was...

* * *

It takes me some time to realise there are no more words coming. Outside the bubble of time I built for myself and Nimh using my ship, years pass as I wait for an answer.

Finally, when I know it isn't coming, I look around at the world that was, and pat the cold surface underneath me. Bereft of her, it is only rock.

'There, there,' I say. 'All good things...'

As I walk back to my ship, I can feel time unspooling to its regular pace, now that the consciousness calibrating the time bubble is gone.

Time stretches, and the continuum welcomes me back in.

I wonder what I might be like when I am Nimh's age. I could check, you know. I could simply tell my ship to find me, half a universe old, and there I'd be.

But no, that would be cheating.

In any case, I tell myself as I set my ship to depart, *its far more fun to get there the long way around.*

THE OTHER SIDE

Jay Eales

Day 1

It was a bumpier landing than anticipated. They might as well have let him pilot the time ship manually if this was the best they could manage. It was almost as though they did not trust him.

The Doctor picked himself up and righted his upturned chair. Despite the incredible internal dimensions of the craft, the console room contained just a single chair, and a single occupant. By choice.

He retrieved his pipe from under the console where it had lodged itself beneath one of the carved legs. Undamaged, thankfully.

The briefing documents assured him that the environment outside was within acceptable tolerances, but he checked anyway. It would not have been the first time that intelligence had been sorely lacking. Drawing back the curtain to unveil the portscreen revealed a mist-laden landscape dominated by one feature: the Wall. He did not need sensors to tell him the important bit. He was on the wrong side. Again, not for the first time.

Onward.

His people lived by a code of non-interference, but they were not slaves to it. There was wiggle room, and a preciously small number of deniable assets to do the wiggling. The Doctor was one such. There were those content to look at a picture, and those who had to touch. The Doctor left his fingerprints everywhere he went. So he wore gloves. And he wiggled.

Control had seen fit to provide a wardrobe of local attire to help the Doctor blend in with the natives. But as they had deposited him the the no-man's land between Falantir and Uhmber, how appropriate Falantiri clothing would be was reliant upon the direction he decided to walk, wasn't it? The briefing notes did not stretch to anything regarding Uhmberite fashion.

He laid out the clothes across his chaise longue and cast an appraising hazel eye over them: grey and uniform-like, with a white triangular brooch at the right breast. The rough fabric was exactly the shade of grey that might seep into the very culture of a world and bleed into the hearts of its citizenry. It reminded him of home and why he chose to leave.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the dressing glass; the ornate blue and gold stitchwork of his brocade jacket dazzling. He did not choose to sleep often, but when he did, it saddened him just a little to have to disrobe.

Gathering his field kit and *forgetting* his Falantiri disguise, the Doctor drank in the wonders of his glorious TARDIS, as though for the last time. For it might be. He ignored the angry buzzing beneath his coat sleeve. His was a square jaw, and he set it against his handlers.

After a final adjustment to his powdered wig, he crammed a tricorn hat atop his oblong head and pushed open the door into the latest vista, taking an enthusiastic gulp of alien air.

All the years under his belt, nothing ever diminished his excitement to take his first step on fresh alien soil. This time, glittermists, and what was that in the air? Something spicy that caught the back of his throat. He had never experienced anything like it. His palms grew damp inside his gloves.

Mission objectives or not, *this* was why the Doctor travelled. The deal he had struck; his people would, perhaps reluctantly, indulge his meanderings, and in return, he would undertake certain jobs or missions on their behalf. At first, these missions were negligible — an annoyance, but nothing set again freedom he had been gifted to explore time and space. He found it difficult begrudge his people the bargain. In time, his leash grew shorter and the missions grew more onerous.

He attempted to slip his bonds but was swiftly found, and his chains went from theoretical to physical. The crystal cloudband around his wrist stood as a reminder of his servitude. Smooth, seamless, and impregnable by anything the Doctor had yet encountered — he had the scars to prove it — it paired his mind to that of his handler and was capable of transmitting targeted bursts of emotion in either direction. His people did not condone torture or violence, but passive aggression was their forte.

The TARDIS door clicked shut behind him; by habit, he pushed back against it as though he wanted to make sure his escape route was there. As always, the door remained firmly set against him, and would remain so until the job was done. Or wasn't.

<<<DISAPPROVAL>>> the cloudband sent, accompanied by a low rumbling at his wrist. He self-censored the response he wished to send, fearing the damned thing would never pipe down.

The Doctor struck out for the Falantir Wall, leaning lightly upon his cane, a holdover from his last mission, from which his body had not yet entirely healed.

Behind him, wreathed in glittermist, was the TARDIS, and now he had some distance, he could see the Barrier more clearly. Or rather, he could see its absence. An invisible forcefield — attributed to alien interference, according to the briefing dossier — which twenty years previously appeared unheralded, and took a bite from Falantir, annexing their EastSec from the rest of the city.

He had seen forcefields before, though rarely on such a scale. The fascinating thing was where the Barrier had cleaved through buildings, leaving them standing on either side like cutaway diagrams, their innards exposed, human ant farms to the observer. Where the

field came down, whatever stood in its path had been hammered flat, but it left everything else undisturbed.

The Falantiri side was gone, and the Doctor saw where. He was walking upon it, crushed and pounded down to form the no-man's land.

As the Doctor neared the Wall, he paused for breath. He was unsure whether it was the wear and tear on his body, the spiciness of the air he Was breathing, or a combination of the two. In any case, he wanted a smoke. It couldn't hurt. He tapped out the bowl of the pipe against the gate, echoing against the metal. He let the ash and tobacco remnants mix with the dust and debris on the ground.

As he rummaged in a pocket for his pouch, he teased out a bowl's worth of his favoured blend and began to tamp it down into the pipe with gusto.

Without ceremony, but with a great deal of grinding metal bolts shifting, the gate opened, and the Doctor found himself faced down by an armed soldier — not for the first time, and categorically not for the last.

'I don't suppose you have a light about you, old son?' He smiled, but then the soldier brought his gun down and all the lights went out.

Before

Another sky. Alien, yet he had been here. Twin suns bathed the world with pleasing warmth. The Doctor closed his eyes and luxuriated in the radiation, gently baking himself. He sucked in a lungful of air, comparing it to others he had experienced.

Odd. In the act of inhalation, the air shifted and became something else. Something *other*. *Decay*. A wave of nausea swept over him and he brought up bile.

His eyes snapped open, and the world had similarly transformed. The suns had set in an eyeblink and no longer welcomed his presence. He felt pressed down by an enormous sense of foreboding, his head whipping wildly about in the near-darkness to find his bearings. He took shallow breaths to avoid any repeat performances by his gag reflex. He saw little in the way of familiar landmarks in the desert.

Relief washed over him when he saw a familiar silhouette ahead of him and knew there was nothing more to be done here. Even in the pale silver twilight, he could make out the door; open and waiting to carry him home. Or if not home, anywhere but here. As he focused on his destination, the space between them telescoped away.

The ground was treacherous underfoot, a mix of sand and loose rocks. He barely got used to his boots sinking into the sand before he hit rock, and lurched to a stop, arms pinwheeling. His clothes were tatters and where his flesh peeked through, it was burned.

Onward. His ankle turned on an unexpected rock andp itched him forward onto one knee. He threw his hands out; only recognising they were battered and bloody as they sank into the warm sand. But it was not sand and the random rock formations were not rock, but hot ash and bone. His gorge rose again, but he managed to hold it in check.

With some effort, he climbed to his feet and began to walk. When he could no longer walk, he stumbled, and eventually crawled, never taking his eves from the open door.

As he adjusted to the moonless dark, he saw through the door frame a beating heart where his console should have been. Was this the heart of his ship? Somehow, it was darker than the shadows around it, twisted and cancerous. He saw it beating; more than that, he felt it. In the ground and in his chest. He had never known fear like it.

The nearer he dragged himself, the weaker he grew, and the stronger and faster the heart beat. He felt his own pulse quicken in response, an angry vibration at his wrist.

Between each beat, he thought he heard a whisper:

<<<wake>>>

Beat.

<<<wake >>>

Beat.

<<<WAKE!>>>

Day 6

'Wake up, Doctor!'

The Doctor started awake, blinking wildly, trying to focus on the face before him. Bearded, though not well maintained, like a garden gone to seed. Oh yes, and male. The bearded male wore a concerned expression on his bearded face. That was a good start at least, given that the only other person he had met on this world had pointed a carbine at him and then introduced his skull to the non-business end. Luckily, his wig had absorbed the brunt of it.

The concerned citizen was dressed in ill-fitting garments that could only be prison fatigues. He tilted his head to the side and the room came into sharp focus before him, much to his chagrin.

He pulled back his bedclothes and found himself wearing equally unflattering regalia. Even less appealing than what he had been provided with in order to fit in. His heart sank.

'Brose!' He was confident that he had remembered the fellow's name, so thought he'd test it out.

'Are you well, Doctor? You seemed to be in distress.'

'You're telling me. Do you know, I think these clothes would fit better if we swapped them.'

The Doctor leapt from his bunk and, to all intents and purposes, loomed over Brose. He had at least a foot on him and his trouser legs stood at half-mast, while Brose's bunched around his bare feet. The Doctor's sea-green tunic was emblazoned with the word 'ALIEN'. Brose's lilac ensemble marked him similarly as a 'DISSIDENT'. He looked unsure as to whether the Doctor was serious and clutched his flapping tunic protectively about himself as a pre-emptive measure.

The mania soon drained from the Doctor's eyes as the last remnants of his nightmare withdrew and he remembered the last few days in captivity. He sat back on his lumpen mattress in a state of resignation. Brose looked up at his own bunk and thought better of it. He pulled up the cell's sole chair, its legs scraping the cold stone floor, and sat down.

The Doctor fiddled absently -with the cloudband, the only possession he had been left with. He had still-tender scabs on his the wrist where they had tried unsuccessfully to remove that too. It felt dead to his touch.

'Nothing to say, eh?' he said under his breath, low enough that Brose did not overhear.

* * *

Soon enough, guardswards arrived to escort the prisoners to an outdoor courtyard for mandatory exercise. It was the highlight of the Doctor's day except that he was certain that the guardswards were deliberately taking a route that would force an encounter with other inmates. That enabled them to make a point, enforcing one of their seemingly arbitrary rules banning association between prisoners from different cells.

At a command from the guard, Brose immediately assumed the position, turning his face to the wall. The Doctor was less conditioned, and so the guard slammed him against the wall, holding the back of his head painfully in place while his colleagues escorted their hooded charges past.

Despite being prevented from seeing the newcomers, the Doctor filed away the details he did pick up for future opportunity. He recognised the footfalls of the guardswards, unchanging in all the days he had been incarcerated. The scent of their uniform leather, but beneath it, individual scent markers he would remember if the need should arise. Perhaps he wasted his time, but the mental exercise kept him sharp. He had few enough tools in his arsenal at present; he would not turn his nose up at a potential advantage, however unlikely.

The prisoners were a different matter. One, he immediately identified by the shuffle-hop of movement and tang of sweat. He had not yet identified the prisoner's gender, but he had grown fond of these little non-meetings between them. The other prisoner was a newcomer with rattling breath that Perfumed the air with a sickly sweetness. Every few steps, the rattle brought forth a cough.

'Will you stop that coughing?' a guard hissed, the first speech the Doctor had heard from them on these excursions. He pinned another detail to the noticeboard. As they drew nearer, even as the prisoner tried to stifle the coughs, the smell grew stronger.

'You really should get them some medical assistance,' the Doctor said earning a crushed nose against the wall as his own guard pressed harder.

'Shut your mouth, prisoner.' The guardsward leaned in so that his face was almost nose to nose with the Doctor's, leaving spittle on the Doctor's cheek.

'In my opinion, it may be some sort of ketoacidosis. But don't feel you have to take my word for it, I'm only a Doctor.'

His favourite guardsward chose that moment to put an end to the Doctor's intervention by smashing a truncheon down on the back of his left leg — his bad leg. The Doctor crumpled to the floor, pain blossoming from his knee joint. Meanwhile, the other guard detail hurriedly nudged their charges past the incident and out of sight around the corner. More pieces to add to the puzzle.

Released from his own position against the wall, Brose looked to the Doctor with his concerned face again. The man only seemed to have the two expressions: concern and anxiety. He seemed to be willing the Doctor to stay quiet, but then, he did not know him very well.

The Doctor drew his knees up, tentatively massaging the injured one and trying to avoid wincing. He looked the guardsward in the eye.

'You're definitely off my Christmas card list.'

Day 7

The Doctor dreamt of the TARDIS again. He woke with the receding howl of its time engines fresh in his ears. He sighed and shifted in the lumpen bedding, the springs creaking under

him as he failed to find a comfortable position. His gammy leg stuck out over the edge of the bed, in the cold, a better option than the pain which lanced him when cramming the leg into the confines of the bed covers.

Brose's breathing changed in the bunk above him. He had woken him, but Brose was trying not to make a thing of it, bless him. Within a couple of mutes, he was away again, enjoying the sleep of the just.

With a short tap, he woke the cloudband and sent his report. Aside from the slightest movement under the covers, no technology this world had to offer could detect anything amiss.

<<<QUERYSIGN>>>

<<<ASSENT>>> The response came back instantly.

No sleep for the wicked.

<<<DELAY>>> he sent.

<<<IMPATIENCE>>>

<<<INTENTIONAL>>>

The cloudband sent a memory image of the Falantiri clothing the Doctor had spurned.

<<<CONFIDENCE>>> he replied.

<<<MOCKERY>>>

<<<TRUST>>>

The cloudband paused. The handler had no immediate answer, it seemed.

<<<EXPENDABLE>>> it replied.

<<<TRUST>>> the Doctor sent again.

Another pause.

<<<ASSENT>>>

The Doctor mimicked sleep for the next twenty-eight minutes until the cell screen would chorus the beginning of Twoday.

* * *

Despite being delivered with all the grace of a grandchild throwing down an unwanted present, prison breakfast Falantiri-style was quite palatable, a plate heaped with a colourful assortment of fruit chunks, in a protein-rich broth containing unexpectedly spicy grains. The Doctor recognised none of it but ate heartily. At least it didn't contain people. As far as he could tell.

His cellmate showed rather less enthusiasm for his own plate. Based on the limited menu he had experienced since his arrival, the Doctor supposed that Brose had eaten the exact same meal many more times previously, which would dampen the culinary experience after a while.

'So,' the Doctor said, 'what are these grains? Some sort of pepper or lentil? They've got quite a kick.'

'Ignit seeds,' Brose replied, 'Don't get too fond of them. They don't grow in our soil. We import — sorry, *imported* them from outside the sector. Until the alien blockade. I suppose they're dumping the remaining stock to feed the prison population to avoid sullying the Citizens. "Falantiri Food For Falantiri Folk", they say.'

'Well, let's enjoy them while we may!' The Doctor shovelled in another mouthful.

'They put them in to mask the taste of the mood suppressants.'

The Doctor scrunched up his face, worrying with his tongue at an ignit seed stuck in his teeth.

'That's it,' he said 'I knew I'd had it before.' They were lacing the food with sedatives. And they had no appreciable effect on his people. Useful to know. He filed it away.

* * *

Turn right at the door.

Seventy-three steps and right again.

Twelve steps to the air vent with the loose cover plate unexpectedly smelling of noodles.

Ten more and sharp left. Eighty-six steps to the next turn, assuming no arranged interruption from the incoming prison escort.

That's where the recirculated air gave way to fresh air from outside.

The Doctor could have done it blindfolded, if pressed.

The journey to the exercise yard was uneventful for once, and the Doctor was only shoved twice by his favourite guardsward to encourage him along. Not that he needed the encouragement. His leg felt much better, but he maintained a laboured stride for the benefit of the guards.

They would have twenty minutes under the sky, away from the omnipresent screens and the guardswards out of earshot, mostly. It should have been thirty, but the escorts bored easily, it seemed.

During these sessions, Brose was more forthcoming than in their cell. The Doctor had politely skirted the question that was not to be asked of a prisoner, but Brose volunteered the information anyway. His tunic marked him as a dissident, but it was only part of the story. He was a former officer of the Vigilant, decorated twice for his diligence under Vellin's command, before the Barrier. He had pride in his work before the Barrier. Vellin's replacement Sentra had seemed ineffectual as Hearth Reeve, but she had another face to show once she got her hands on the Shield. Ambitious officers of the Vigilant scrabbled to inform on their superiors to climb the greasy pole in the service, whether their evidence was real or manufactured.

'You're quite agreeable for a Secret Policeman, Brose,' the Doctor patted his shoulder.

'Probably why I ended up here.' Brose seemed resigned to his fate, but that was probably the suppressants. Brose nudged the Doctor's arm; the guardswards were meandering closer, possibly within earshot. Without sudden moves, the prisoners shuffled further into the yard, away from the guards' straining ears.

'This,' Brose said as he pulled at his lilac tunic, 'When I was given this...' He broke off, his eyes started to fill up, but with a cracked voice, he went on: They made me wear this, and it didn't fit, but I've grown into it.'

The Doctor's cloudband vibrated. The guardswards agitated as they directed their attention toward their gauntlets; the wrist screens, usually illuminated, had gone dark. Even at a distance, their panic showed that this had not happened to them before. If they had a contingency plan, it had flown away.

<<<FLIGHTSIGN>>> the cloudband sent. <<<FLIGHTSIGN NORTH>>>

The Doctor craned his neck northwards and his eyes alit upon the subject of his handler's message; a small section of the weathered wire fence that was more compromised than it appeared to be. He had discovered it on his second day in captivity.

Brose nudged him as their escorts ran inside, their charges forgotten.

<<<FLIGHTSIGN>>>

<<<DISSENT>>> he sent back. He looked at the fence, the prison gate and Brose.

<<<FLIGHTSIGN — FLIGHTSIGN>>> An undercurrent of desperation fed back through the cloudband, but he had made up his mind.

'Doctor?' Brose looked for him to lead. He had that sort of face, whichever face he wore.

They headed for the gate, the recirculated air and seven-by-five-step cell. He ignored the buzzing threat signs from the cloudband.

Sixteen paces inside, they came face to face with their escorts, who had finally remembered their duties. Brose looked sheepish, while the Doctor beamed. Caught by surprise and obvious relief, the guardswards broke into smiles too. They did not even shove the Doctor along this time, even when he hesitated as he passed the first of several screens, dead and black, save for the words 'STAND BY'.

Nobody else noticed that the prison sounded different. The high-pitched note that constantly filled the air, and only ceased at the gate to the yard, was absent. The microphones had failed too. The Doctor wondered whether the screens had died across the whole prison or the whole of Falantir.

He also wondered if he was the only agent operating in the city. Did they trust him so little after the debacle of his last mission? Did they think he needed rescuing? That he had no plan? He had a plan. Of sorts.

The guardswards they encountered on their way back to their cell were far chattier than normal. None of them had a clue what was h they openly swapped outlandish theories as to who was behind it. The Harudograft were mentioned most but always in hushed tone, even amid their excited babble, as though the feared summoning them, or worse, being laughed at by their peers. Just saying the word 'Harudografe' was a ten-demerit fine.

They had been cut off from their chain of command. They seemed young before, but now they were little more than children playing dress-up. They had certainly picked an interesting time to volunteer for their City Service. It did not look like there were any lifers on duty today. The way Brose told it, some joined as career guardswards, but most signed up for the two-year term, took the benefits of full citizenship and ran.

Back in the calm quiet of their cell, the Doctor dragged out a chair and sat astride it so he could lean his arms across the back and rest his head upon it. He fixed Brose with a serious look.

'I think it's time we talked about the Harudograft.' Brose's head snapped toward the screen. It remained locked in diagnostic mode. The STAND BY message flickered across its face, utilising a font no doubt chosen to be most intimidating. He sat down.

They talked, and at some point during the conversation, the Doctor heard the background hum return. He chose not to mention it.

When the cell screen returned to life, Brose stopped mid-sentence. The Doctor was happy to carry the conversation single-handed.

As the forbidden word left the Doctor's lips again, Brose moved from seated to upright so suddenly, without appearing to do any of the time-consuming movement in between, so keen he was to stifle the speech.

'The screen, Doctor,' he hissed. 'They'll hear.'

'Oh, I certainly hope so! What's the point in saying something clever without an appreciative audience to hear it? Present company excepted.' He grinned and wished they had not confiscated his pipe so he had something to do with his hands.

'Besides' he continued 'the microphones started up again ages ago.'

'Oh Doctor.' Brose's face fell. 'You've undone me.'

'chin up, old son! Have a little faith. I'm a Doctor.'

'If that's true, you need to work on your bedside manner.'

'Said the Dissident to the Alien...' The Doctor was in a good mood today.

The Doctor had been counting, extrapolating how long it would take for them to pick up the conversation and decide to bump it up the chain of command to someone with actual authority. Brose had entered into his tenth minute of spiralling won-v when the Doctor raised a hand to hush him.

He had bet himself a cheese sandwich that the cell door would open in five... four... three...

The door opened.

Close enough.

A guardsward entered the cell and indicated with her carbine that the Doctor should accompany her. With the screen watching, it seemed the escorts reverted to their monosyllabic state. The less you said, the less they had to use against you.

'Oh hello! Looks like my ride is here.' The Doctor rose to his feet. No need to get up on my account. I'll be in touch.'

A raised eyebrow from the guardsward told Brose that his presence would not be required.

* * *

For his debut appearance before the Reeve Council, the Doctor was allowed to wear his own clothes, rather than his prison fatigues. The Council scrupulously maintained the appearance of fairness, that their rule was benign. Having an alien dragged into their chambers with the stink of imprisonment upon him was not the Falantiri way, apparently. Never let it be said that the Reeve Council practiced deception upon their citizens without being prepared to deceive themselves.

The city's Council building was blessed with a number of apartments for entertaining guests and the use of Councillors during extended sessions. They shoved the Doctor in one of the suites reserved for alien ambassadors, unused in the years since the expulsion. The air was stale and dusty, but beggars and aliens could not be choosers.

The sand shower was rather more abrasive than he had anticipated, but it did a better job of ridding him of the accumulated grime of the last few days than he had managed using the rationed water supply in his cell. It also left a pleasant fragrance behind, the same spice kick the Doctor remembered from his first breath of Falantiri air.

As he dressed, each layer of familiar fabrics restored a little more of the Doctor to himself. He was interested to see what they had done with them in the time they had had them. They had removed his pocket-chain, with its assortment of keys, mostly decorative, but some more important than he would like to let on to any observer.

Running his hand along the seams of his jacket, he found a slightly roughened patch, where they had clumsily secreted a transmitter inside the lining. He left it alone for the moment.

Another in the wig, naturally. He was missing a button on his breeches, but he would have to live with it. His tricorn had been ill-abused and possibly sat upon, but with some wrestling, the Doctor returned it to something approximating hat shape once more. It took a little more adjustment to replace the crow quill in its cockade. Only the increasing urgency of the knocking on his door spurred him to speed up the process.

'You only get one chance to make a first impression,' he called through the door. He pulled on his gloves, as white and unsullied as the day they were made. As he looked at his hands, a memory detonated: They were bare, bloody and plunged into black ash.

The door frame splintered and a guardsward practically fell into the room as the door gave way to his shoulder charge. The Doctor stuck out an arm to steady him before things escalated further.

'The Council is expecting you,' the guard grunted.

The Doctor snatched up his cape and swept it around his shoulders with a flourish, the only way he knew how, and strode into the hallway threatening to leave his escort behind.

'Take me to your...' He stopped sharply and turned back to the guardsward. 'Come along man, the Council is expecting us！'

* * *

The Reeve Chamber was hexagonal, its marblewood walls gently curving inward as they rose to form a domed roof. Something about the construction suggested it had been grown, not made. The well-trodden and ancient tiled floor was interspersed with carved bas-reliefs featuring scenes of science priests drawn from what the Doctor assumed was Falantir's glorious past.

At the rear of the hall stood a stout marblewood trunk that appeared to have erupted from the ground, sprouting four seats of varying sizes and decoration. The leftmost was throne-like, with a high back and sides adorned with a helix pattern of branches spiralling skyward. Three seats stood beside it, of humbler construction. They looked uncomfortable, a theory reinforced by the facial expressions upon their three occupants. The fourth seat stood empty, a cloth draped over it adorned with the emblem of Falantir.

As the Doctor was walked into the centre of the chamber, flanked by guardswards, the woman upon the throne broke the silence.

'Thank you, guardswards. You may leave us.'

'First Reeve! Is that wise?' The woman beside her spoke up. The guardswards shuffled uncomfortably, unsure of their instructions.

'Mahet,' she replied, 'your concern is well-meant, and I'd expect nothing less of my Shield Reeve, but the matters we must discuss are of a *delicate* nature. Our loyal agents will have combed our guest for any weapons. They will remain at their posts just beyond the chamber doors. With my Shield and Sword beside me, we will be perfectly safe.' This, then, was the First Reeve, Routh Urbine, tenured longer than any of her predecessors, according to the briefing document. That left her younger companion as Mahet Sentra, the Shield Reeve and commander of the secret police, the Vigilant. At the end was the Sword Reeve,

Siadrac Arnem, General of Falantir's army and possessor of a mighty soup-strainer of a moustache.

'I would welcome you to Falantir Doctor, but pleasantries aside, we would have words with you.' Urbine appeared to be in late middle-age, the Doctor surmised. He would go no further than that, given the flexible nature of his own people. She beckoned him closer, and he obliged. Sentraput her hand to her hip and loosened her holster. Arnem made the same movement but wore no holster today. He seemed surprised, so patted his leg instead.

'Doctor,' Urbine began, 'we are aware of your conversation with your cellmate today...'

The Doctor nodded vigorously. 'Mm... Ignis seeds, I'm told. Delicious.'

Sentra slapped her palm against the arm of her seat, startling Arnem. 'Do not take us for fools, alien!'

'Oh, I see. This is about the...' He paused. 'You want to know my theory about the...'

'The *Harudograft*, man! Tell us about the Harudograft!' Arnem was red-faced and looked surprised to find himself on his feet.

'There we are! I do apologise, Arnem. I was curious to see if you could say it out loud without catching fire.' The Doctor smiled and shuffled closer.

Sentra's hand hovered over her holster, while Arnem chuntered to himself. The Doctor was watching Urbine, who seemed as unruffled as ever.

'Doctor, your theory,' she said.

'Yes.' From a pocket, he produced his pipe and waved it hopefully. 'Do you mind if I...?'

'Yes,' said Sentra and Arnem in concert. The Doctor looked crestfallen as he stuffed it back into his pocket. He took a step closer.

'Later, then. Anyway, as a litte bird will have told you, my friend Brose and I were having a jolly chat about your old chum Noa Vellin. That a decade or so ago, he made some sort of deal with an unknown alien power in order to make a power grab for... say, a quarter of Falantir?'

'EastSec. You tell us what we already know, fool,' said Sentra.

'I'm just laying out the dominoes, m'dear.' The Doctor began to pace back and forth. 'So, the Harudograft are big on forcefields. Great big invisible forcefields able to slice a city the size of a continent down the middle.'

'What's your point?' asked Arnem.

'Well, I asked Brose what the Harudograft looked like. After' he got over the putting his hands over his ears every time I mentioned their name stage, do you know what he told me? Of course, you do. You were listening. He'd never seen them. Nobody has.' He took another step.

Sentra opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out 'First Reeve, in ten years, has anyone seen a Harudograft? For that matter, this world used to be open house for galactic commerce, yes? Enough to require somebody to sit in that empty chair?'

Urbine slowly nodded.

'Did you ever hear of a race called Harudograft, or one with the technology to build that Barrier?' He waited for her headshake, and she did not keep him waiting long.

'I won't lie,' the Doctor said, 'I've been around a bit, and I've never heard a whisper of them either. It's been known to happen, don't get me wrong, but a bunch of invisible

aliens no-one's ever heard of, building invisible forcefields on an empire-making scale... I have to wonder what's in it for them?'

'Well...' Arnem began, 'Power behind the throne, with Vellin as their puppet, of course.'

'Not only that. Why mess about with just EastSec? -Why not slap the Barrier right down the middle of Falantir?' The Doctor inched closer still.

'They needed to consolidate their power first, win over hearts and minds, Sentra said. 'Then they'll come for the rest.'

'They'll try,' said Arnem, and made a fist.

'They're taking their time about it. In ten years, has the Barrier moved as much as an inch further into Falantir?'

'You know it hasn't,' Urbine said quietly.

'They're undermining us from within,' Sentra said, 'Hardly a week goes by without some subversive action or other. You yourself witnessed their latest terrorist act when they brought the Vigilant surveillance grid down.' She paused momentarily. 'Merely a *temporary* inconvenience. The culprits will be brought to swift justice.'

'Their agents are everywhere,' Arnem said. We should never have agreed to repatriation. Any number of Uhmberite spies could have slipped in among the citizens.'

'I'm sure that there were more than a couple of your own going the other way,' the Doctor said.

'We do as we must, Doctor.'

'We do,' the Doctor agreed. His cloudband buzzed gently, but he ignored it.

'Say what you've come here to say,' Sentra said, 'I want to hear it from your lips.'

The Doctor drew in a deep breath of Falantiri air and let it escape through his mouth. 'I think Vellin made them up. Nobody's ever seen them because they don't exist.'

Sentra let out a sharp bark of laughter. It did not suit her. 'As I told you, Routh. He's a lunatic. An *alien* lunatic at that. Will you let me have him returned to his cell now?'

The First Reeve raised her hand to silence Sentra, but she was not finished yet.

'The Harudograft don't exist, then? Next will you tell us that the forcefield doesn't exist either?'

'Not at all,' the Doctor said. 'I think my ship bounced off it when I arrived.'

Sentra and Arnem laughed, but Urbine's mouth remained a tight line. Sentra looked across at the First Reeve and stopped laughing.

'You don't *believe* his nonsense?' Her expression darkened.

'I... have more questions,' Urbine said.

Sentra finally acknowledged how close the Doctor had crept towards the councillors, and her hand flashed to her side.

The Doctor pressed a stud on the straw-like item he'd retrieved from his pipe stem earlier, and it immediately telescoped out to become his cane. He brutally slashed down onto Sentra's hand as she withdrew her pistol. She flinched and drew her injured hand up to her chest, the pistol clattered to the floor between them.

'I don't much like it when people point those things at me,' he said.

Arnem looked down at the pistol and back to the Doctor.

'I don't fancy your chances,' said the Doctor, before stabbing his cane down through the trigger guard and flicking the gun across the tiles.

Sentra filled her lungs and called out, 'Guardswards! Assassin!'

The chamber doors burst open and four guardswards ran inside, raising their carbines. Sentra opened her mouth, but whatever she intended to say was drowned out by another voice.

'Hold!' The First Reeve was on her feet, her hands and voice raised, her words calm and clear.

'But. . .' Sentra said, silenced by a look from Urbine.

'Stand. Down.'

The guardswards lowered their carbines and retreated into the antechamber.

Urbine waited until the last of them passed through and had drawn the double doors together before she took her eyes from those of her Shield Reeve. The Sword Reeve looked at neither. He looked at his boots. For a military man, he made a good bureaucrat.

'No more games, Doctor. Tell me, why Yellin would manufacture such a threat?'

'Now, that I don't know. Yet.'

'Then what makes you so certain that the Harudograft are a feint?'

'Well, old stick,' the Doctor sucked on the stem of his pipe, 'It's what I'd do.'

Day 10

The Doctor took his time winning over the First Reeve. It took him until Fiveday. It was his confidence as much as anything. He had buckets of it to are, and the Doctor's confidence was infectious. He could charm the birds down from the trees when he put his mind to it. On a previous mission, he had charmed the trees too, to the surprise of everyone present, including himself.

Arnem was a weathervane. His support shifted according to whoever had last spoken. The Doctor felt he could work with that. Sentra, on the other hand, had set her face against him from the beginning, and the feeling was mutual.

When he was not unleashing the charm offensive on the combined Reeves, he remained on best behaviour, confined to his apartment. He flipped through channels on the home screen, and soon concluded that Falantiri entertainment devices were missing one thing — an off switch.

Granted the freedom to walk the streets of Falantir unescorted, so they said, the Doctor quickly picked up a sense of the city and its people. The reluctance to speak out about certain subjects, the ever-present self-censorship when they believed anything they said could be overheard and used against them and their families. He listened for the unspoken things in the gaps between what they said and what they wanted to say.

Since the Barrier, things had grown worse, and the Falantiri learned to fear the times when Uhmber's Prex broke into their screencasts, filling the air with Uhmberite propaganda. Every time it happened, it would be swiftly followed by a Vigilant clampdown in retribution. Anyone found propagating the spread of Prex Vellin's words would be taken away for debriefing. Sometimes they would be returned, and other times the family would be issued With a plastic receipt chit in lieu of their loved one and strongly encouraged to comply with regulations in order to escape the same fate. Punishing citizens for listening to seditious broadcasts, on screens the Vigilant installed in every home, was an irony lost on the secret police.

Against the Shield Reeve's protestations, Urbine allowed the Doctor's request to view the Prexcasts. Prex Vellin regularly spoke to the Falantiri about the freedoms enjoyed on the other side of the Barrier, often accompanied by footage of the great bonfire of screens that marked the beginning of his Prexidency. Vellin gave speeches about the

repressive conditions the Falantiri were forced to survive under, and the Vigilant would respond by reinforcing the message with even greater sanctions. It was no wonder that the people were unhappy.

'The citizens are unhappy?' Arnem's moustache quivered. He looked to be in genuine pain, but it might have been heartburn. Rationing did not extend to the plates of the Reeve Council. The Doctor had seen the signs on Arnem's belt where he had let it out by a couple of notches.

'The citizens are never happy,' Sentra said, 'Living under the threat of the alien Barrier is not conducive to a happy life.'

'Neither is living in a society where the television watches you back,' the Doctor said.

'Doctor,' Urbine said, 'your presence among council is at my indulgence in order to help us, not to undermine our way of life.'

The Doctor remained silent, sucking on his pipe and releasing the smoke from the corner of his mouth.

'You ask much of us, Doctor,' Urbine said. 'I confess, I want you to be right, but if you're not? You put us at great risk. Uhmber has our citizens convinced that they have the support of an alien power. How do we combat that?'

'You have your own,' he replied matter-of-factly. 'You have me.'

'Do you have anything practical to offer in preventing Uhmber from using our technology against us with their broadcasts?' Urbine asked. Her voice held the promise of annoyance to come.

'I'd need you to provide me with tools, and let me take a look at the innards of one of your screens ...'

'Out of the question,' Sentra barked.

The Doctor meandered in circles, spiralling closer to the centre in front the Reeves. He threw his hands up in an exaggerated shrug.

'Then turn the screens off.' He looked up, directly at Urbine. No smile. 'As soon as their signal cuts in, turn the whole lot off. Can't hijack a signal isn't there.' He blew a quick succession of smoke rings and then drove his that outstretched index finger through the middle of them all, dispersing it. His smile returned.

'First Reeve,' Sentra said, 'this alien would lay us open to our enemies. In blinding the Vigilant — by our own hand, no less — we would become helpless.'

'Oh shush,' said the Doctor, 'no need for the histrionics. You switch it off, give it a minute and crank it right back up again. Ideally, you wouldn't bother with the second part, but baby steps, yes?'

What's to stop them from just doing it again?' Arnem asked. He did not look convinced.

'That's the beauty of it, old boy.' he motioned toward Arnem with his pipe stem. 'Every time they try to take over the airwaves, you pull the plug. Give it a go. They'll soon get fed up and look for new games to play.'

'And if they don't?' Urbine leant forward. 'Sentra makes a good point. How will we protect our city without the ability to witness any wrongdoing?'

'Ever thought of trusting them, Urbine?' He paused a moment to let the remark sink in. 'Oh, hark at me! Trust them? If you could trust the people, your prisons wouldn't be so full, would they?'

The First Reeve pulled a face.

'Look at it this way,' he continued, 'you can either carry on as you are and, whenever he feels like it Vellin gets to tell the city how awful their life is, and how over the the rainbow in Uhmber, everyone's skipping through fields of wheat, or you can interrupt the telly schedules but rain on the Prex's parade. You pays your money and takes your choice.'

'I was hoping that you'd give us a way to block their signal, to improve our systems,' Urbine said.

'Oh, I'd be happy to improve your systems. Just pop an axe in my hand and point me towards the Vigilant's main computer and get straight on it.'

Arnem spluttered, but before he could rebut, the Doctor chimed in 'Your *people*,' he looked from Urbine to Sentra and back again, 'won't even let me have a peep in the back of your screens, I'm good, dear, but not *that* good.'

* * *

Eventually, the First Reeve acceded, and they found themselves gathered together to await the next Prexcast. The Shield Reeve insisted on taking personal control of the situation and had the override slaved to her personal wristscreen.

When it came, opening with images of flames and cracked screens as usual, Sentra stabbed at her wrist just as Vellin's preening face and Cheshire Cat smile materialised. All over Falantir, the screens went black.

Three times. That appeared to be the limit of Vellin's tolerance, and when the screens powered up again, the signal remained uninterrupted.

Arnem seemed drawn to shake the Doctor's hand with great enthusiasm. He must have been genuinely impressed, because he had not looked across at Sentra to tell him how he should react. Urbine merely looked relieved. Sentra offered him a thin-lipped smile, but her eyes suggested it had been dragged from her by a pitchfork-wielding mob.

Day 35

The seasons shifted over Falantir, and the glittermist gave way to frizzle, the Doctor's name for the freezing drizzle hailstorms that scoured the streets and ripped leaves from the trees without warning. It sent the few citizens caught in it scurrying for shade. The Doctor was not one for scurrying. If anything, he found the frizzle stimulating as he made his way about the city, the frozen missiles bouncing off his hat, clothes and hammering upon the pavements. He held his head high despite the battering he received from the weather. A particularly sharp hailstone struck his chin, drawing red, but he found it a reasonable exchange for the experience. Home had nothing like it.

It amused him to think of the Vigilant peepers assigned to dog his footsteps, abandoning any pretence at secrecy in a mad scramble for cover. Not that they had remained unobserved by him in any case. If it had been a game, the Doctor was so many moves ahead of the Falantiri agents, he had moved onto an additional board. He entered shops through one door and left through another; he ate lunch on a specific bench in one of Falantir's many splendid parks, striking up seemingly random conversations that were in fact completely innocuous encounters; previously functional microphones went on the fritz when he entered a room.

The apartment made available for the Doctor's use during his secondment was a hive of activity. Given its single occupant was not given to entertaining, whenever he went out, a team of 'maintenance operatives' would be inside like a flash, testing and adding to

the numerous surveillance devices installed throughout. They were reasonably good at their jobs. The Doctor was better. Sometimes he went out just to give them something to do. And sometimes, hidden in the noise of a hundred mundane errands, unnoticed by his shadows, he checked his dead letter drops and stocked his rainy day bolt-hole.

Once he had proven his value to Urbane with a succession of victories against Uhmberite saboteurs, he was in a stronger position to barter with the First Reeve. Sentra's visible opposition worked in his favour. It was clear to all that she was blocking him at every turn. Yet, he still brought more results than the Vigilant with all their resources.

'If I can achieve this with one hand tied behind my back,' he said, looking pointedly at the Shield Reeve, 'imagine what I'd be able to do with those bonds cut.' He rubbed at the cloudband around his wrist, which felt tighter than ever.

The price he extracted for his continued support was Brose's release. His old cellmate was surprised by his liberation. The Doctor stopped him before his show of gratitude reached embarrassing levels.

'Get up, man! They've only just given you those togs and you're already scuffing the knees out of them.'

There was no question of Brose being allowed to return to his former role with the Vigilant. Even though the trumped-up charges that led to his imprisonment had been quashed, the label of 'dissident' stuck. He confided to the Doctor that it was something of a relief. Having been on the receiving end of their justice, he wanted no more of it.

For all its faults, Falantir had a decent programme of social housing. Brose would not be left to fend for himself on the streets until he found new employment.

The Doctor insisted on buying Brose lunch the first day after his liberation. He knew just the right bench. So did his observers, who had to rely upon the microphones they secreted nearby, as the Doctor chose that particular bench for its distance from any foliage they might be watching from. The Doctor heard a cry of frustration emanating from a shrubbery shortly after he thumbed a hidden stud on his cane and every bug within twenty feet of him popped, crackled and gave up the ghost.

He apologised for the lack of anything containing ignis seeds, but outside the prison walls, they had grown hard to come by. Brose told him he had had enough ignis seeds to last a month of Onedays.

Pausing between bites of his fishwrap, Brose spoke his mind. 'Are you here to save us, Doctor?' Such an earnest expression. The Doctor recognised he had picked up another pet.

'Whatever gave you that idea?' the Doctor said, taking a double bite of his own wrap, ignoring the juices that escaped down his chin. He kept to himself the calculation at the heart of every decision, a calculation with two columns. He looked at Brose and mentally added one to the plus column. A drop in the ocean weighed against the number in the minus column. He heard the black heartbeat from his nightmares again and struggled to swallow.

Brose continued to look at the Doctor's face but the Doctor avoided his eyes. His fishwrap grew cold.

Day 43

Word among the whispering classes reached the Doctor's ears that the Uhmberite Prex intended to stage an assault on the one of the Vigilant relay stations to temporarily knock out their ability to override his broadcasts. Without his ability to regularly stir the pot, the

Falantiri citizens had started to sink back into their normal apathetic state. The Doctor pushed for more detail as to Vellin's plans, but no one knew. He considered sharing his findings with the Reeve Council to score more brownie points, but he did not want to dismantle his network so soon.

He also had a better idea.

It took him a couple of days to lay the groundwork. He was running short of his special tobacco blend; the one that played such merry hell with Falantiri surveillance devices. At a pinch, he could use the cane to knock them out altogether, but it was preferable to give the impression that it was atmospherics and shoddy workmanship rather than anything he had done.

He found a passable supply of tobacco leaf, but the cupboard was bare when it came to the active ingredient. That meant he had to go tricorn in hand to his handler via cloudband.

After some frantic emoting back and forth, agreement was reached and they transmatted in a contraband package to an agreed location in the SouthSec tenderloin district, where the Doctor had scoped out a useful dead zone, free from Vigilant eyes and ears.

Day 45

Shopping among the arched galleries of Falantir was as close to a holiday as the Doctor ever remembered. He bought little, but he was an avid window-shopper. His eyes drank in more sights than any spending spree could have purchased. He moved around too much to accumulate *stuff* that would weigh him down. He had to be primed to leave a place at a moment's notice, possibly with a fireball or revolution at his heels.

This Threeday, he was buying. The fishmonger had a special order for him. As he reached across and took possession of the package, the Doctor enjoyed the little details. Falantir was a recycling-friendly city. Fresh stiltfish, neatly wrapped in yesterday's news sheet, the same as had been done for decades, probably, the package given shape with string. Even the string had history. It had been used and reused, cut and reknotted for further service. Make do and mend was an especially useful mantra in a time of austerity, where Falantir's resources were mostly directed towards the conflict with Uhmber.

The Doctor had barely stepped outside the shop when he was intercepted by a couple of Vigilant agents who snatched his dinner away.

Sentra must be getting desperate, he thought. *Good*.

As they, made off with the package, the Doctor feigned annoyance and called after them.

'If I shan't be allowed to eat my dinner, at least make sure to pack it with salt and a touch of grypwort!'

He took pleasure in imagining the agents, up to their elbows in stiltfish guts and squinting for hidden messages among the stained news sheet articles, when he had already got the message committed to memory by looking at the placement of knots. A subtle mark, to all intents an accidental stain on the string, but it told the Doctor where the message began.

The message was a single word: *Skyglass*.

Day 46

When Fourday evening arrived, the Doctor resisted the urge to play with his watchers for once. The officers assigned to his surveillance that day saw him lazing about, making numerous cups of tea and reading an alien contraband book called *Biggles Sorts It Out*. He smoked a couple of bowls of the local blend without the magic ingredient; he wanted to keep the dogs contented and sleepy, not ready to instigate another 'random' inspection.

There was a barely perceptible flickering of the lighting when the relay station went black, but nothing to alert anyone outside the loop. The Doctor knew it was his sign. Curtain up. Time to go to work. The ever-present screen was tuned to some sort of propogandist melodrama, though the Doctor had paid it little attention. Until now. He recognised the thinly veiled fictional version of the Prex, emblazoned on pro-Uhmber posters slapped up in the street. The regular cast were mocking him. One of them drew on the posters, blacking out his teeth and so forth. Pretty simplistic stuff, he thought.

The screen image snapped from caricature to an image of the real Noa Vellin as the Uhmber transmission broke through. He skipped the usual burning screen imagery, launching straight into his speech.

As though someone had set his tricorn alight, the Doctor leapt from his reclining position and with some well-practiced levering, he discarded the screen frame and scrabbled at the gap uncovered between screen and wall, dislodging the unit and pulling it away from the wall on one side. Just enough to expose the wiring in the recess behind. Buried among the leads, away from a casual inspection, he retrieved a small battery pack and its attached cables, ending in crocodile clips.

Although muffled from his position crammed in the wall space, he could hear Vellin holding forth on the usual pot-stirring subjects, emphasising the freedom of Uhmber and the repressive regime of Falantir. The Doctor had studied enough of the tapes to quote them verbatim, but his tone had changed. Where there had been the warm smile of a baby-kissing politician before, the warmth had been replaced by hostility. Vellin emphasised Uhmber's strength and Falantir's weakness.

Time was tight, the Doctor sensed. The Vigilant would have restored power soon enough, and Sentra was almost certainly poised with her finger to cut the broadcast. One last wire to strip and hook up the cable clips. He did not quite pull his finger away quickly enough when he connected the last piece of the Puzzle and a spark arced from the live wire to his fingertip. He fell back, landing on his coccyx, pain shooting up his spine. He did not have time for its so shut down his pain receptors and looked up at the wonky screen to admire his handiwork. It had worked. Just as Sentra triggered the shutdown command, the Doctor had shifted power to his backup, like pulling a lever to switch train tracks at the last second. Sentra's signal was shunted off along a dead relay.

The broadcast continued, at least for this single screen. The Shield Reeve and all her Vigilant officers would be none the wiser. More significantly, nor would Vellin.

As far as Vellin was concerned, Falantir had cut him off again, and he did not seem pleased. In fact, he was in full on tantrum-mode. Any pretence at statesmanship had gone, replaced by the need to destroy. He swept the impressive-looking law books from the Prexidential desk and threw a comm-unit at his portrait hanging behind his chair.

'You said we'd have more time,' he said.

The Doctor followed his line of sight, but behind the lights, the shadows were practically solid.

There was a reply, but unmiked, he could not distinguish much from it. He willed the Prex's companion to step into the light and yet he was surprised when they complied.

Was this one of the Harudograft? Had his gambit been wrong after all? He had been so sure... His eyes strained at the phosphor dots of the screen, willing them to form into something he could work with. He dared not look away for an instant, even though he needed to prepare for the system reboot, due at any moment. Luckily, while soldiers were trained to field-strip their weapons blindfolded, his hands retained the muscle memory to get his pipe fired up independently of any other concerns he had going on.

A dark shape separated itself from the shadows and stepped into view. The Doctor, resisted the urge to punch the air. Humanoid, and clothed unlike any local fashion he had come across. Plaid trousers with matching waistcoat. *Plaid*. A style choice leaving the Doctor thinking a little more favourably towards Falantiri grey. An impressive moustache went some way towards compensating for the plaid ensemble, but only if the Doctor was in a charitable mood. For reasons he could not articulate, it reassured him that this was no Harudograft. Aliens don't wear plaid.

'Can't Skyglass help with this?' Yellin turned his attention from destruction of office furniture to the advisor, now he had stepped into range.

'It's still early days. The fine focus isn't there yet. Give me more resources, and get you what you want.' His body language suggested to the Doctor that he did not see himself as an underling.

'More? We're funnelling everything into the project and I've yet to see anything more than conjuring tricks to show for it.'

That was it, the Doctor thought; that familiarity niggling at him. The mystery man reminded him of a stage magician, even down to the prop, a fancy gold-topped cane. All that was missing was the high hat for production of doves, or the Uhmberite equivalent.

For want of a better name, the Doctor decided to dub the man behind the curtain as Oz. Whether he was 'Great' or 'Powerful' remained to be seen.

Oz started to reply to Vellin's accusation, but fell silent as he glanced across at the camera. He held up his cane, and the bulb flickered to life. He examined it for a moment and then shushed the Prex before he could utter another word, and advanced on the recording equipment.

'We're still broadcasting,' he said.

'What?' Yellin scrambled to adjust his clothing, cursing under his breath, but Oz flagged him down with a backward-facing arm.

Oz said 'the light went out like before...' He continued towards the tripod, '...but a little birdy tells me that we still have an audience. A VIP, you might say...'

He stepped in front of the lens, filling the Doctor's screen, and tilted his head to one side, as though he could see through the glass into the room on the other side. The Doctor looked back, tilting to match, and wondered if he could.

'Hello Doctor,' he said, and he smiled. 'Nicely played, but no shortcuts. Isn't that right, Chuckaboo?' He raised his cane up, and the flickering bulb flared into full life.

The Doctor flinched from the screen glare, covering his eyes as the electrics crackled and smoked, turning the battery pack into nothing more than a doorstop, and fusing wires into molten slag.

* * *

There was no covering for the fragged screen, so the Doctor decided to push over the dominoes before someone else did.

The Reeve Council was already in session when he arrived, despite the late hour. More guardswards were on duty than usual. As he was ushered inside, he made a big play of closing the doors, covering for him sliding a brass statuette he had conveniently appropriated through the handles.

Small talk was short-lived. It was clear that none of them were in the mood for it, so he assumed that his apartment had already been turned over, and reports filed.

Still, he approached the Reeves, checking the limited exit options, seeing that both Sentra and Arnem were armed tonight.

'Sorry to drag you away from your dinners,' the Doctor said, 'but I've just uncovered another piece of the puzzle and thought you'd want the news while it's hot.'

'How interesting, Doctor.' Sentra said. Sarcasm oozed from her voice. Another bad sign. 'I wonder if your piece fits with my own.' She got to her feet. 'You'll be aware of the attack on our relay station earlier today?'

'I did notice my screen went on the fritz for a while,' he said, 'but to be honest, I had my nose in a good book.'

'You'll be aware,' Sentra continued, 'because you engineered the attack, did you not?'

The Doctor played along and pantomimed surprise and outrage as his role required, all the time moving closer.

'You're a very poor spy, Doctor.' Sentra said, 'Good spies don't get caught' And as for those ridiculous clothes...'

The Doctor held his tongue. He wanted to disagree. He got caught all the time, and found it helped enormously.

'Not another step, Doctor.' Sentra raised her pistol. learned my lesson'.

Raising his hands, the Doctor decided it was time to tip over the domino. 'Glad to hear it. Perhaps one of you might teach me all about... *Skyglass*?'

He sprinted for the door they never used before waiting for an answer. It was what saved him, as a projectile spun through the air where his head had been moments earlier. He did not need their words. The answer was in their eyes. Confusion from two of them, but from the other, *recognition*.

Urbine called for the guardswards, but the barred doors held. Just.

Sentra got off another couple of shots before the Doctor reached the door, each closer to the mark.

Arnem finally managed to draw his weapon and fire, sending marblewood splinters flying far from his target. He was as poor a marksman as the Doctor had hoped.

His luck held. The door remained unlocked and unguarded, just as he had found when he scoped it out during an interminable council session. He could run the route blindfolded if he had to.

With a twist of his cane and a blast at the right frequency, he overloaded every light source in the building, plunging them all into darkness. Now they were all blind.

* * *

The hunt for the Doctor began by the meagre light of their wrist screens. The guardswards breached the council chamber before Arnem could waddle across to admit them.

Sentra ordered all Vigilant surveillance teams to drop their current assignments and focus on locating the alien spy. They set search grids from all the council building exits and

ranged outwards from there. Every screen switched from passive to active mode, and a thousand eyes roved between their monitors, searching for a glimpse of the bewigged offender in his distinctive mode of dress.

The systems were limited by manpower. They had no facial recognition software or predictive algorithms, just cameras and eyeballs.

The Shield Reeve's motivational approach was entirely volume-based. If she wanted something done, she shouted. If she was dissatisfied, she shouted louder. She encouraged informants not only among the citizenry, but among her staff. Under her command, the Vigilant operated in a state of anxiety that at any moment, they could be on the other side of the glass in an interrogation room. There was an oblong discoloured patch and an empty hook where the Officer of the Month plaque used to hang. It reminded them of their former colleague Brose, whose image was an almost permanent fixture on the plaque. Until it was not.

There was an electronic bleep every time a search grid finished a sweep and the monitors switched to the screens further out into the city. Each time the bleep sounded without sight of the target, and the Shield Reeve's frustrated response that followed, the atmosphere grew more intense.

One of the officers tentatively suggested a new approach. When Sentra approved it, the eyes of every other officer in the room looked daggers at them, and worried about the interrogation room again.

There were eighteen exits from the council building. Teams spooled back through recordings of the nearest screens to each exit, hoping to pick up the point at which he fled the scene. Once they had that, they could narrow the focus and track him wherever he went. It was a sensible suggestion, and others kicked themselves for not coming up with it first.

It did not bear fruit though, and Sentra's retribution raised more than a few smiles from those very colleagues.

Eventually, although he had hidden them well, they found the Doctor's clothes.

* * *

The breakthrough came at last when they turned the search inward and brought up the footage from within the council building. Screen coverage was sparser than the city, made almost useless when the Doctor took out the lights. But they did have a series of stepping-stones to follow. The chamber door he had used, where he hid his clothes, and a handful of screens that mysteriously failed. They formed a trail that pointed straight to the Doctor. One of the Vigilant officers let out an excited yelp. The others crowded around her screen, weighing up the value of her discovery and whether they might take the credit.

'Um... Shield Reeve? I think I've got something.'

'You think?' Sentra said at volume.

'I've got something,' she said more confidently. 'Sending it to your screen now.'

A still image, barely visible in the weak screen light, showed an extreme close-up of a face. Sentra recognised the chin.

'This was just before the screen failed,' the officer said.

'Which screen?' Sentra asked.

'It, uh..., the Officer said, 'it's the one leading up to the private quarters.'

Arnem's voice cut across the transmission. 'Damn it! How did he know there's no surveillance up there?'

Sentra spoke again. 'I want you to activate the screens in the Sword Reeve's apartments.'

In the background, Arnem could be heard protesting.

'And the First Reeve's, Commander?' the Vigilant officer asked.

There was a pause before Sentra answered. 'Yes.'

Neither apartment showed any indication of disturbance. Sentra and a squad of guardswards marched up to the Reeve quarters, while Urbine and Arnem tagged along at the rear.

'No bugs in your own rooms, I gather?' Arnem said.

* * *

Dressed Falantiri fashion, with a white woollen tabard jacket over grey workwear, the Doctor had been gifted with plenty of time for mischief-making. He found what he was looking for in Sentra's apartment. A repurposed cupboard with a false panel, behind which he found a private transmat device. The control pad had been removed; presumably Sentra kept it on her person. Just as well he had come prepared. His cane had a setting for practically anything.

He heard the door open, even though they attempted to be stealthy. Arnem's grumbling did not help their efforts.

He waited until he could see them through the door frame before he activated the transmat, so he could wave. A mistake, as the primitive teleporter required a little time to warm up, and Sentra was an excellent shot.

Localised time around him seemed to slow down and he saw the bullet with his name on it as it spun towards him. The hum of the transmat grew louder and suddenly time sped up and he was elsewhere, while the bullet was not.

* * *

Dominating the Doctor's line of sight on arrival was a concave wall of screens; the same as Falantir's larger street models, but twenty units strong. Each of them hissed with roiling golden static, oscillating between the individual screens and a single interlinked image. The transmat process was rough enough on a body, but the Doctor's gut spasmed for another reason. There were raw time particles in the atmosphere. A low concentration, certainly, but that they were present at all was a concern. This was Skyglass.

Behind a bench strewn with scopes and other equipment, a couple of boffins looked up at his abrupt appearance. He caught a glimpse of the mysterious Oz making a sharp exit through a side door. At least he assumed it was Oz, unless the plaid had grown contagious in Uhmber.

He knew without doubt that this was Uhmber, despite the windowless bunker surroundings. Nothing else made sense. Confirmation came when the scientists stepped from behind the bench to question his intrusion, and their black Uhmberite insignia could be seen.

The elder of the scientists made a beeline for the Doctor, but as he crossed the floor, the screen display flared and flickered with activity, an image coalescing from the static thirty feet tall.

All eves turned to watch.

The Doctor had always wondered what the back of his head looked like, and there it was, larger than life. The image washed into and out of focus, but still recognisable. And then, Sentra clubbed him down with her pistol grip. The Doctor continued to watch as he crumpled out of view on the screen, which then sank back into golden noise.

Behind him, the transmat began to hum into life.

He took a step to the left and felt the breeze as the newly-arrived Shield Reeve's lunge missed and she fell past him into the room.

Having underestimated Sentra before, the Doctor took no chances; his Strikes were clinical and precise, and ended with her pistol in his hand.

* * *

'I had my money on it being you,' the Doctor said, 'It was the way that every time I got close, you'd try to have me shot. I didn't take it personally,' He glanced over to the scientists, but they were keeping their distance from the man with the gun.

'Although,' he continued, 'Arnem surely can't be the duffer he makes out to be?'

'It's no act,' Sentra finally broke her silence. 'His father was a great soldier. Arnem is... hewn from different timber.'

'It took me a while to piece together what you'd been up to with the fake aliens and real forcefields. One city cut into two and both sides taught to hate the other.' The Doctor dropped to a crouch, bringing himself down to Sentra's eve level, but kept the pistol trained on her. 'But to what end?'

He leaned closer. 'You said back in the chamber that good spies don't get caught. They do if that's the intention. I meet all kinds of interesting people behind bars.' He saw Sentra tense and stood up and stepped out of range.

'Brose, you'll know. An absolute mine of information. He really does love Falantir. Not fond of traitors to the city, though. All I had to do was point.' The Doctor grew bored of holding the gun, but it allowed him to talk at Sentra without the irritation of more fisticuffs. 'He introduced me to a very interesting person. A big part of the puzzle. One of the corner pieces.'

The Shield Reeve looked confused.

'Her name was Sheeh,' the Doctor said, 'I don't suppose you'd remember her especially. What's one dissident among so many?'

'I met her briefly in prison,' he continued. 'Funny story. She'd got an unpleasant spot of ketoacidosis the jailers didn't seem interested in until I made a fuss. Terribly grateful. And turns out, she worked on one of your secret squirrel projects. Three guesses as to which one.'

Silence.

'More than three? Oh, you have been a busy girl. No wonder you and Vellin had to cook up this whole cold war business,' he said, 'so you could siphon the combined war budgets of Falantir and Uhmber to finance Skyglass.

Sentra said nothing to correct him.

'Still none of it would have been possible without Sheeh and her colleagues, eh? First Ablative Generator Technician I ever met. Terribly clever. So clever, it seems, that you could sell a simple story of a technology only an alien super-race could possess, when it was homegrown all along'

'Of course, you couldn't sell that story while there was a danger of anyone crying foul. So, instead of a medal and a cushy academic post, you gave her a prison cell.'

There was the sound of applause from across the bunker. Vellin had been listening.

'Well reasoned,' Vellin said. 'It also gave us the opportunity to fan the flames of anti-alien sentiment, to weaken Falantir's position and boot out any offworlders that might raise suspicions about the Harudograft. It was child's-play to put Sentra in my vacant council seat.'

Skyglass began to crackle and pulse across its screens. Vellin turned in admiration.

'What do you think, Doctor?' Vellin said. 'Tell me it's not worth it.'

The Doctor watched as the signal strengthened and golden snow formed into the image of Uhmber from beyond the Barrier, with its housing blocks open like ant farms. The screens around the outside began to display a different image — a close-up of a hand clenching a stick, the thumb depressing a button. The central image changed too; the translucent Barrier briefly turned visible before it winked out of existence. Without support, the buildings began to tumble.

Vellin fired first. Whether he intended to hit the Doctor or not, the bullet found Sentra. Her surprise was written all over her face. The Doctor ducked as Vellin shot again, returning fire. Vellin dived for cover, but he was not the target. There was an important-looking bank of machinery beside the screen wall, so he aimed for that, emptying the pistol.

Whatever he had done, Skyglass reacted catastrophically. The image froze and then reversed, raising buildings and the barrier, only to raze them again. Back and forth like a pendulum, we the machine sparked and smoked.

The scientists were in uproar. They leapt from their stations and attempted to evacuate, but Vellin blocked their path. He ordered them back to their posts, as though there was any way to repair the damage.

The Doctor was surprised to find that Sentra still lived. He managed to help her up into a more comfortable position but could not staunch the wound.

She pushed his hand away and raised her arm onto her stomach and began to scrabble on her wrist screen with her other hand. The Doctor attempted to follow her actions, but her fingers were racing over the buttons.

Sentra grimaced, and her arm fell uselessly to her side. The Doctor saw desperation in her eyes and lifted her hand back to the screen; she stabbed at the screen one final time and executed her last command.

Vellin's own screen turned to static. 'What have you done?' His voice echoed in the bunker, a doppler effect as the words returned from various points in the room.

The answer dawned on the Doctor. He could not wait to share the news. 'I know.' His voice had the same effect. 'Sentra flipped the switch. Every passive surveillance device in Uhmber is acting as a broadcaster. Not just the screens, like in Falantir, but the comms, the light fittings and even the windows. That hubbub you can hear, Mister Prex, is the sound of Uhmberites waking up to find their freedom is a lie.'

The scientists took their chance to make a break for the door again, but Vellin shot at them and fled. The Doctor left him to it. There would be nowhere he could hide. He was

Uhmber's poster boy, the face of the city. He had run out of road and it was only a matter of time before gravity caught up with him.

Once Vellin had gone, the Doctor raced over to check the scientists. The young female cradled her colleague in her lap on the floor. Head shot. He shook the scientist's arm to rouse her attention. He had questions and needed answers, and time was short.

'Who built Skyglass?'

'Hurracan.' She indicated the fallen man.

'Where are the plans? His notes? He clicked his fingers to get her back again.

'There are none.' She smoothed loose hairs from his forehead, smearing the blood. 'He kept it all in there.'

That was good enough for the Doctor. He encouraged the young woman through the bunker door with the minimum of threats and barred the door. He vaulted the bench and made for the transmat. As he passed Skyglass, the screens showed him himself again. Pressing the button on top of his cane repeatedly.

Abruptly, every screen died, until only a single phosphor dot remained on the central one.

He warmed up the transmat and made an adjustment to his cane. and hefted Sentra's body against him onto the pad. He activated the transmat and gave his cane a twist but did not stay for the fireworks.

* * *

Evading patrols was a lot more work than before. Outed as a spy, his cover was well and truly blown.

When the Doctor reappeared on the transmat pad in Sentra's apartment, he was dragging Sentra's dead weight with him. Guardswards surrounded him before he could say anything, their carbines raised. It was only the extreme close quarters that spared him in the melee that followed. The fighting was not pretty. The Doctor was all elbows, knees and headbutts; the guardswards colliding with one another, thankfully not discharging their weapons and deafening everyone.

The Doctor barged his way clear enough to run at the window, grateful that the glass broke before his bones. The carbines started firing before his feet cleared the windowsill.

Any landing you could walk away from was a good one. A good landing for him, but not for the tri-mobile on the street that he left with a new sunroof.

He had no time to pause for breath, so he did not, melting into the night ahead of the hue and cry.

Skirting around the street screens to avoid the hidden cameras, he nevertheless caught the emergency broadcast by the First Reeve. Formerly his biggest advocate, Urbine said she had seen the evidence of her own eyes: her Shield Reeve dead after pursuing the Doctor through an unregistered transport device. The Doctor on the run, exposed as an Uhmberite spy. She set not just the Vigilant but also the guardswards on his scent and offered citizens a reward for information leading to his capture. Urbine did not do things by halves.

There was nothing to gain from explaining that Vellin and Sentra were the architects of the plot. That the cold war between Falantir and Umber was as phoney as the Harudograft. She had taken him at nothing more substantial than his word before, but that currency had run out.

All he could do now was run. But before he could go to the TARDIS, he had one last errand.

* * *

Empty.

The most secure of the Doctor's dead drop caches, away from the bugs of the Vigilant, and more importantly, in one of the few locations he had uncovered where his cloudband went dark.

Entering the park, with head down and hands stuffed in his pockets, he encountered three others on his random-seeming walk. They were likely to be heading to or from a factory shift and paid him little attention. One nodded in passing but did not break stride.

The Doctor passed by the bench where he lunched. He stroked the arm, paint flaking off at his touch. As he sauntered in the general direction of the bush where his watchers kept a scrupulous sandwich tally, he thumbed a button on his cane. It was compressed to its pocket-size configuration for easier concealment. There was little point in wearing the collar-itching Falantiri fashion if he was going to draw attention to himself with an ostentatious walking stick.

At his touch, the device emitted a high-pitched tri-tone, and although it was evening curfew, the Doctor saw, a small flat-topped cylinder rise softly from the soil beside the bush.

It amused him to think that his safest hiding place had been under the feet of the officers set to keep watch on him. He did not slow down as he approached. but merely leaned over and plucked the cache from the ground. Spike-shaped, and no wider in diameter than his wrist; he gave the top a single brush to clean off the earthy residue and disappeared it inside his jacket in a fluid motion. In daylight, it would have been barely noticeable to a casual eye, but in the half-light of evening, he might have been discarding a cigarette end.

There was a pagoda at the centre of the park, so he headed there to empty the cache. A sheltered wall he could crouch behind, while maintaining good line of sight for any patrols.

Unscrewing the flat top of the stake, he upended the cache over his other hand, preparing to catch the contents, but nothing came. Shaking it did not help. Despite all his precautions; the circuitous routes he took to shake off any interested parties; all for nothing. Someone among the Vigilant took their job more seriously than the rest.

Someone else had set the dominoes falling, and he would have to run to get ahead of them.

His anger boiled over and he kicked the cache clear out of the pagoda where it clattered on the path. He ducked down, just in case. He ran through his options; he saw it as a TARDIS corridor where all the doors were slamming shut on him one by one. Behind one of the doors, Brose.

To the ship, then. He had done their dirty work again, with no light at the end. He would be damned if he walked back to where he had parked.

Safely out of the dead zone, when the cloudband had woken, he calmed his emotions and sent his request:

<<<TAXI>>> No response.

<<<TAXI>>>

<<<QUERYSIGN STATUS>>>

The Doctor emoted the nearest symbol he could think of to a Champagne bottle.

<<<ERROR QUERYSIGN>>> No sense of humour, as ever.

He sighed.

<<<SUCCESS>>>

Further debate became a moot point as the strained chords of a TARDIS rotor pushing its way through spacetime filled the air, no more than a side street away. The Doctor ducked into the alley, and there she was, nestled in the shadows among crates of various sizes, one of the most beautiful sights his eyes had seen. His ruined plans dismissed, he put his hand against the door. Instead of the living warmth he was used to, he felt resistance. The hairs on the back of his hand prickled. He tried the key, but as it slid into the lock, the TARDIS seemed to fade into insubstantiality around it. His fist beat against the door, but it was like striking jelly, leaching away every erg of force.

He woke the cloudband angrily, but before he could think rude thoughts, he was interrupted by a theatrical throat clearing.

Further down the alley, a figure appeared from behind a dark crate, lit by the watery moonlight.

'You've forgotten something,' the newcomer said. He sported top hat and tails, and the plaid trousers the Doctor found so offensive.

'Oz. I was wondering when you'd show your face,' the Doctor said.

'Oz?' He rolled the name around for a moment until the ends of his moustache lifted. 'I approve.'

'Are you one of ours,' the Doctor said, 'or one of theirs?'

'Very much *ours*, Doctor,' Oz said. 'In an advisory capacity, lending a hand where I could.'

Tightening his grip on the top of his cane, the Doctor ground the tip into the dirt. 'Typical of them. Not a word that they'd sent another agent.'

'Need to know...'

'Did you hear about Ortmeir?'

The twinkle in Oz's eyes went out. He nodded.

'They hid an Excoriaphage in my TARDIS.' The Doctor's mind shielded him from the full horror with metaphor, as a cancerous black heart 'When mission went south, they set it loose.' He spat on the ground.

Oz offered no excuses.

'It scourged the world,' the Doctor said. 'All those lives. I could have…'

'No,' Oz cut him off. 'You nearly died.'

The Doctor recalled his tortuous crawl over the dead into the ship, and long months of rehabilitation afterwards. The very next mission, and they were doing it again.

'Damn it, you were right there in the room,' the Doctor said. 'Why assign me at all? You could have destroyed Skyglass yourself.'

'Come, come, you don't need lessons in causality, Doctor,' Oz said, 'I only knew about any of this because you did the legwork. Without your footprints in the sand, I'd have been as lost as you.'

'Just let me go. I've done as they asked. Falantir is no longer a threat to us. Nobody else needs to die.' All masks dropped now. This was all he had left. Two columns, plus and minus. Too small a number in the first column, and in the second, too large.

Oz fished in his trouser pocket and drew out a wrench-like tool that the Doctor immediately recognised. It was not the Vigilant who uncovered his cache after all.

What's this? Some sort of matter cracksaw? Not bad. That should just about manage to crack that cloudband of yours. An ionic rebonder would be better, of course.'

'On a backwater like this. Be serious,' the Doctor countered. He did not take his eyes from the device.

'Mm... Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose,' Oz agreed. 'Can't let you have it, m'boy.' He tapped his nose. *'Reasons*.'

The Doctor shifted from one foot to the other, planting himself in anticipation of violence.

'How did you plan on circumventing the Fast Recall Switch?' said Oz. 'Call it professional curiosity.'

'I'll slave the console to a randomiser unit I've been tinkering with. A bodge job for now, but if they flick the switch, the last place we'll end up is home. As soon as I wash up somewhere with a well-to-do post code, I'll fix it properly.'

Oz nodded along, while the Doctor ran through attack patterns.

'That might even have worked,' Oz said, stuffing the cracksaw back into his pocket. He looked genuinely sorry, for what that was worth to the Doctor.

He had to try, but although he was a good head taller than Oz, discounting the topper, the smaller man countered his every move. It was... *infuriating*. He only caught him once, knocking aside his bulb-topped cane, which sent it clattering to the ground. He was not expecting, as he pressed his advantage, the cane to take on a life of its own. At Oz's gesticulation, it flew at him; he barely raised his own cane in time to counter.

Oz tapped the case of his fob watch. 'Your TARDIS door won't open for you until you finish the job.'

'The job's finished. Skyglass is rubble and the only one who could rebuild it is dead. All of Uhmber knows their Prex is just as much of a horror show as Falantir's Reeves. Revolution beckons, rah-rah-rah.'

'Not while the Barrier stands. Do you need a reminder?' Oz lifted his cane and the bulb flickered and an image danced in the flame. The button pressed and the Barrier fell.

The Doctor looked away before he saw bodies fall from the collapsing buildings again.

'I can't tell you how things will turn out for Falantir and Uhmber after you press that button. Will they build bridges or another wall?' Oz said. 'That's down to them.'

The Doctor looked at his cane. 'You want the number?' Oz looked drained. 'One hundred and thirty eight.'

'There has to be something else...' the Doctor said

'It's one hundred and thirty-eight against nine and a quarter *billion*.'

'It's always nine and a quarter billion! I can’t keep counting them every time they send me out. How many have I saved here? *Two*, maybe?'

'If I could press the button for you, I'd do it in an instant.' Oz sighed. 'You got Sheeh to show you how to bring down her Barrier. I know you've already calibrated your cane for the job. Press the button and you get to go home. Or don't, and in less than five minutes, soldiers will open fire from both sides and there's no happy endings.' He snapped his watch case shut. 'Time's up.' Oz turned on his heel and headed toward the large crate he had hidden behind.

Presenting his key, lights sprang to life from the box, illuminating windows and a sign bearing the perplexing legend: 'POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX.' The door opened, but he stood

on the threshold. 'One more thing. I left you a consolation prize. He gestured vaguely down the alley. 'Down the side of your TARDIS.'

A plastic bag nestled against the ship. He saw a familiar brocade pattern poking from the top and his spirits lifted a little.

'I know how fond you were of that jacket, so I took a little detour. Mum's the word, eh?' His smile had returned. 'Hopefully it will remind you who you are.' Oz went inside.

'Wait! You're obviously upstream from me,' the Doctor said. 'Do I ever balance the books?'

Oz leaned out of the doorway and mimed zipping his lip, then ducked back inside. Just as the door clicked shut, and the TAROTS dematerialised, his words drifted back along the time winds: 'You'll try.'

The Doctor could not ignore the sound of approaching soldiers any longer. He took his last Falantiri breath and pressed the button, grateful to be too far away to hear the Barrier fall.

Adding one hundred and thirty-eight to the minus column, the door opened without resistance.

He would try.

DOCTOR CROCUS AND THE PAGES OF FEAR

Paul Driscoll

'Jack, it's about to start, lad!'

Barney Forrester smiled as, with typical heavy-footedness and nearly tripping over his dressing gown cord in the process, his thirteen-year-old son Jack came bounding down the stairs to join his parents in the living room.

'Honestly,' laughed Barney's wife, Mabel, who was furiously knitting a winter bedspread under a wobbly side lamp in the corner of the spacious room. 'I don't know why you watch that drivel.'

Barney rolled his eyes, purely for his son's benefit, but despite Jack's excitement at being allowed to watch the series, he wasn't fooled by his father's 'lads versus ma' routine. It was him against the grownups in this household, it always was. And always would be. This uncharacteristic kindness was scant compensation for what he'd been put through.

'Click, click, click. Moan, moan, moan. Can't you give it a rest for half an hour, love?'

'And there's me thinking that it's the children who are meant to be seen and not heard, not the wives.'

'Shush, Mum,' said Jack as he perched himself on the arm of his father's recliner chair, eyes wide open in awe of the twelve-inch screen. Even the bland continuity background and logo still amazed him, six months after his parents had purchased their first set.

'Before we re-join the adventures of *Captain Marley and the Monsters from Mars*, we must warn you that this episode contains material that may be unsuitable for children or people with a nervous disposition.'

Barney gritted his teeth and grimaced. This was supposed to make amends.

'Sorry lad, you heard the announcer. Upstairs.'

'But, Dad...'

'Now!'

'It's so unfair. Three weeks building up to the monster reveal, and now I can't see it? You're doing it again, aren't you? One rule for you...'

'Look, if it is going to upset you that much...'

Fighting against his own interests, Barney angrily got up and switched off the television set.

'There. Happy now?' While father and son glared at each other in stony silence, Mrs . Forrester tried to offer some consolation to Jack.

'Never mind, dear, how about I teach you some knitting? Or you can read a book before lights out. That's a far more wholesome pursuit.'

'All right then, I'll read,' said Jack, with a bitterness to rival that of the sugarless and over-stewed tea Mother served up whenever it wasn't a Sunday.

'Just give me back my *Gruesome Tales* comics and I'll be happy to.'

'Oh, not this again,' sighed Barney, not wanting to broach a subject his wife, on the other hand, was always more than eager to discuss.

'You know we can't do that, son. Those American abominations are e work of the Devil.'

'Well, I wouldn't go that far, love. Fact is, they are illegal, Jack. What would the neighbours think if they found out the local beat officer had a stash of them hiding in his house?'

'You're turning into a pair of commies if you ask me.' And on that note, Jack ran up the stairs even louder than he'd come down them.

Mabel was off again, sighed Barney, crying her bleeding heart out. It was a sight that he never coped well with, whatever the reason for the tears.

'Why can't he like football and that *Ron of the Rovers* or whatever it's called? Why does he have to be so different, Barn?'

'There, there. He'll get over it,' Barney replied, with about as much sincerity as a door-to-door salesman.

'Joining the force has really brought out your sympathetic side, hasn't it?' moaned Mabel. Though she would never dare give people the impression that she was anything but proud of her husband's occupation, she lived with the constant anxiety that it had a greater hold over him than she ever could. If truth be told, she despised it.

'School of hard knocks, my dear. School of hard knocks.'

Mabel rushed to the bathroom, upset by the calculated words Barney had taken from her strict and distant father. She was still battle-scarred from a childhood that had been governed by those cruel and loveless parenting manuals of the 1920s, in which children were regarded as clay that needed to be moulded into shape.

Barney, completely desensitised to his wife's pain, rubbed his hands in glee and switched the television back on, just in time to see Captain Marley free Alice from a Martian hive and, with the help of a nuclear-powered rocket launcher, thwart the slimy, faceless invaders from Mars in their bid to take over the Earth.

* * *

'Preposterous. Utterly preposterous.'

The newly rejuvenated Doctor had been watching the same programme from the comfort of his TARDIS. He was having trouble remembering how, to operate the craft, otherwise he'd have been off in a flash to his favourite era in Earth history. By way of

compensation, the late-Victorian outfit worked a treat. When he had first looked in the mirror at his new face, he'd chortled with delight. He was made for the 1880s. Especially with that elegant moustache that he couldn't stop touching at first.

Verisimilitude was not something that could be said about *Captain Marley and the Monsters from Mars*. Although the Doctor wasn't exactly sure what lifeforms, if any, he had encountered on the red planet, he knew that the fictional creatures he had been laughing at for the last half an hour were an impossible fit.

'Sentient slime? Is that the best you can come up with?'

If he was really going to be stuck in north-east London for the foreseeable future, he would need some more riveting period entertainment to pass the time until his memory banks had fully recovered from whatever trauma had triggered his latest renewal. Fortunately, he knew just the place. It couldn't be a happy coincidence that his knowledge of any experiences related to his current location was uniquely unaffected by his rejuvenation sickness, and he had a nagging feeling this had something to do with the ship itself.

It was illogical of course, especially given his period attire, but despite the vast library of two hundred thousand worlds in the inner recesses of the TARDIS, he was very much of the opinion that one should fully engage with the culture of his surroundings and not find escapism in alien anachronisms. He wasn't going to be like those human tourists who miss out on the full overseas experience by taking their own customs and tastes with them.

The next morning, with a glint in his eye, the Doctor once again opened the doors onto the real and present world. Crossing the threshold from infinity, to history always made him feel rather like a god becoming incarnate. It was the thrill of risk and reward in equal measure. He knew he had to make himself vulnerable to time and space if he was to truly live, let alone make a difference.

'Let's see what they make of a bona fide alien,' he said as if addressing someone in particular. 'Hmmm… I assume I usually travel with an assistant or two.'

Resting against an ornate hat-stand, from which he had just selected an exceptionally tall top hat, the Doctor spotted a seemingly unremarkable cane nestled between several umbrellas. He grinned and held out an arm.

'Will you be my chuckaboo?'

The golden top of the cane glowed like a lightbulb, and, after a little excited shake, the object propelled itself into the Doctor's inviting hand.

'Dash my buttons! Still got it, then,' said the Doctor in triumph as he swirled the cane around in a most eccentric and undignified manner. 'Though I'm not exactly sure what *it* is.' With his other hand, he checked the time on a fob-watch that could have be mistaken for genuine period attire like the rest of his outfit, were it not for that fact it was adorned with alien insignia. 'No time to dilly-dally, Chuckaboo, the shop opens in ten minutes.'

* * *

Ted Fowler, the local newsagent and grocer, was the last person Barney Forrester expected to be arresting, but upon arriving at the station that morning he'd been immediately handed a tipoff from a concerned parent.

Even with the evidence lying on the counter between them, Barney struggled to believe it.

'What were you thinking, Ted?'

'Times are hard. I'm just trying to make ends meet. What's the harm in that?'

'Look, I have every sympathy with you, my friend. But, if you were a parent yourself, you'd be more understanding. I'm afraid we have no choice but to shut down your business with immediate effect and take you in for questioning. I realise you're just a tiny spoke in the wheel, but if you cooperate with our investigation, I'll put in a good word for you.'

'They are just comics, Barney. Don't get pulled into those communist conspiracy theories about America's influence. You seriously think banning would stop the trade? What next, burning Lonnie Donegan records? exports you can't fight progress.'

'You sound like my son... wait a minute, is this where Jack's been getting them from? He told me they belonged to a friend.'

'I'm not the one turning him into a criminal. And nor are the comics. Nobody, not even a thirteen-year-old, is stupid enough to read one of these and think "I know, why don't I head off into the woods and kill a virgin, why don't I drink the blood of innocents, why don't I raid the mortuary to create a new Frankenstein's monster?" You should look closer to home for answers.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Just ask him where he gets the money, and why he feels the need to escape in the first place.'

'I tried to be fair. I tried to help you. But I'm sorry, Ted.'

Suddenly, Barney grabbed Ted by the collar and smashed his head against the counter.

'That's for calling my son a thief.'

He did it again, this time with even greater force, splitting Ted's nose.

'And that's for calling me a bad parent.'

'Like I said,' Ted spluttered with defiance. 'Comics don't make people do bad things.'

* * *

Jack was skipping first lesson. The latest edition of *Gruesome Tales* was out today and he had to get copies for him and the schoolmates he sold them on to. The sight of the police car outside the shop stopped him in his tracks. If Dad had found the source, the game was up. Nothing bad ever happened here — apprehending a shoplifter was about as dramatic as it got, providing a rare bit of action in between all the dull civic duties and appearances. Dad would be loving this, thought Jack as he hid in the alley across the road. Closing down an illegal trade would be a real feather under his cap. Then again, maybe, if last night was anything to go by this could be another act of outright hypocrisy. Was he getting himself a copy? Perhaps he'd read the confiscated ones and wanted more.

Jack watched on as a stranger arrived wearing some kind of fancy dress. He'd seen a few oddballs coming to Ted's before, but this fella was new. The shop must have been locked, as the stranger started to bang on the window with his cane. This didn't look good.

* * *

'One of your weirdos, I take it?' said Barney, dragging a dazed and bleeding Ted to the door.

'Never seen him before. Maybe he's come to take *you* away.'

The Doctor looked on with intrigue as Barney stopped himself from striking Ted with his truncheon and, instead, took him out of the shop and bundled him into the back of the car.

Returning to the shopfront to pull the shutters down, Barney waved the Doctor away.

'Sorry, this store is closed for the rest of the day.'

'What happened here?'

'It doesn't concern you, now hop off.'

'Do my ears deceive me, or are you are really telling a gentleman who walks with a cane to hop off? Unless ...' The Doctor took off his top hat and pulled out an unnaturally long string of sausages. 'Surprise, surprise, I still can't pull a rabbit out of the hat.'

'Very funny. You know what I mean. What are you doing in town anyway? You're three months early for the travelling circus.'

'It seems to me it has already started.'

'Look magic man a word of advice. I'd drop the comedy act from your, routine. You're no David Nixon.'

'No, I'm not.' The Doctor looked at Ted's battered face and shook his head, tutting, 'And you're certainly no Dixon of Dock Green.'

'You wouldn't happen to be casting aspersions on a police officer, Would you now? Constable Forrester's the name. Barney Forrester. A pillar of ‘‘this community, I'll have you know. Now, if you'll excuse me ...?'

'Doctor Cornelius Crocus. Apostle of the universe. Look, I've come such a long way to pick up the latest edition of *Gruesome Tales*, it would be terribly disappointing to leave without it. You wouldn't mind sneaking out a copy for me before you go?'

Barney's face reddened as his hand tightened on the truncheon.

'Mr Crocus, if you don't leave now, you'll be joining Mr Fowler in the car.'

'One last question, if I may.'

'Well?' said Barney, confused that somehow he had allowed the stranger to turn the tables, as if he was now the suspect and the stranger the officer on duty.

The Doctor pulled a sausage off the string and dropped the others back inside his hat.

'What would you call this, PC Barney?'

'It's a sausage.'

'Yes, I can see that. Anyone can see that.' The Doctor stomped his feet like a child having a mini-tantrum. 'Oh, the literalism of the man in uniform. It's a sausage, but how would you describe what's on the inside?'

'Look, really... I... I... ' Barney, who had been humouring the madman, was now feeling deeply unnerved on account of his strange, almost hypnotic stare.

'Meaty? Porky?'

The Doctor threw the remaining sausage in with the others. He shook the hat until a puff of golden, glittery smoke rose up and disappeared into the morning sky. 'One person's blood-worm is another's bag of mystery. You would do well to remember that. Good-day to you, PC Barney.'

* * *

Jack waited until the man in fancy dress had walked away and his father, looking decidedly unimpressed, had driven off in the police car. Careful not to attract attention, he approached the shop and sneaked off down the side passage to see if he could gain access through the back. With no way in, he resigned himself to returning to school empty-handed. He'd have to wait though. He could hear the town gossip Mrs Cooper and several others talking outside the front of the shop.

'Psst!'

Jack jumped out of his skin as a boy's head peered out of a back window immediately above him.

'Here, grab this ...'

The boy lowered a rope.

'Come on, what you waiting for...' he whispered.

Jack had been stealing notes from his parent's savings pot and loose change from his Dad's pockets to fund his hobby, but this was a whole different ball game. Breaking and entering. Still, judging from what he'd seen earlier, if his father could act like he was above the law, then... Looking this way and that, Jack finally decided to climb the rope.

* * *

The Doctor returned to the shop, soon after the car had driven off.

He doffed his hat at the loitering customers.

'Ladies... I'm afraid Mr Fowler has been unavoidably detained.'

'And who might you be?' said Mrs Cooper.

'I do hope he's all right,' added her friend, Agnes Brown.

'I'm sure he'll be back in business soon. You'll have to shop elsewhere in the meantime.'

The ladies complained amongst themselves and headed off. Even Mrs Cooper found it difficult to argue with the stranger.

'Who was that man, anyway?' asked Agnes.

'There's some funny business going on here, all right,' Mrs Cooper replied 'Perhaps we should call Barney.'

They looked back at the Doctor, who grinned and waved at them.

'What do you think, Chuckaboo? Can you sense it too... something that doesn't belong here...'

The Doctor scanned the walls and shutters with the cane. The light of its tip guided him round to the back of the shop, glowing brighter the closer it got to the source of the anomaly.

The memories of all his past lives began to come flooding back, causing him to stumble and clutch his temples.

For a moment his entire body sparkled and fizzed with extraterrestrial energy strong enough to power the entire city of London.

'Well dash my buttons!' he exclaimed. 'I remember.'

* * *

Inside the flat above the shop, the boys had found a batch of freshly minted comics.

'Go on, take as many as you like. And be quick, the cops will be back in no time to take them away as evidence.'

'Who are you?' said Jack. 'I didn't know Ted had kids.'

'He doesn't. Like you, I shouldn't be here. Not now, at least.'

'You're not from round here.'

'We moved in a few weeks ago. be starting school soon.'

'Welcome to the club. It'll be nice to have another *Gruesome Tales* fan, there aren't many of us.'

'*GT* is okay. But there's better stuff out there. This is like *Listen with Mother* in comparison.'

'You're joking, right?'

'Where do you live? I'll bring them over sometime.'

'You'll be lucky. My dad's the police officer who arrested Ted.'

'Assaulted him more like. I'm not scared of your father. Are you?'

Jack put on a laugh.

'Of course not. I wouldn't be here now if I was, would I? What's with the strange clothes? Hey, your dad isn't that guy with the cane I saw outside, is he?'

'I like to dress up. This particular outfit is from *The Devils of Dartmoor*. Creatures from another planet who take human form and haunt the dead.'

'The dead?'

'Yeah — best bit is when the victims rise up from their graves, sleepwalking, and scare the living daylights out of the villagers. The haunted become the haunters. Usually the humans kill the aliens, but what happens when you can't kill the dead?'

'If you can't beat them, join them?'

'No. You have to learn to live with them. Come on, let's grab the comics and get out of here.'

* * *

Outside, the boys were surprised to find a circle of scorched earth in the muddy garden behind the shop.

'The man with the cane,' gasped Jack, indicating a set of footprints with tell-tale small holes beside them. The prints led to the side passageway, suggesting the man was long gone.

'He's not my dad. But I'd very much like to find out who he is...'

Jack shuddered. There was something almost sinister about his new friend's tone. He could have sworn the boy had just hissed like a snake, and now he was stood frozen, staring emptily ahead and drooling.

'Are you okay? If there's something you're not telling me... '

The boy laughed. 'Had you there, didn't I? That's what they do. Scary, ain't it?'

'What who do?'

'Why, the Devils of Dartmoor of course.'

* * *

The first thought of the Doctor after his dramatic restoration was to bid farewell to present-day London. He'd left the store garden and immediately returned to the TARDIS, fully intent

on setting sail. But one thing was troubling him. The anticipation of finding something else that was alien to the period had fast tracked the healing process. The smallest of anomalies, however benign, excited him so much more than even the most beautiful of wonders in its correct time and space. Whereas in the past he might have seen it as his mission to bring order out of chaos and restore equilibrium, he now felt a far greater kinship with those versions of himself that revelled in time-bending paradoxes and fireworks. As long as he wasn't the one to set them into motion. He'd ride them, play with and manipulate them even, but he couldn't allow himself to be the cause.

If there was something alien already here, it would be remiss of him not to investigate. In short, he couldn't possibly miss out on a rare opportunity to have some fun in an otherwise bleak and censorious period of British history. But first, he had to know that his memories were reliable, that he could indeed once again fly this thing. After all, if time itself was being crossed, as he suspected from the readings of the sonic cane, then he might need to journey to whatever past or future world had been interfering with the here and now.

A few cosmetic changes to his ship were also in order, but as much as he sensed that this particular rejuvenation had a certain riotous, cheeky and iconoclastic streak, he was essentially a traditionalist. Order not for order's sake, but because it worked for him. Without it as a starting point, how else could he see and have fun with chaos? In truth, he felt a huge sense of embarrassment about some of the design choices taken by his former lives. 'Time for a reset,' he pronounced before reconfiguring the ship into a form far closer to the original model. 'There, that should do it. Now then, how did I fly this thing? Ah yes...'

It was almost like a dance as he circled the six-sided console and operated various switches, buttons and pulleys until the central column began its eerie rise and fall. The disharmonious sound would have been unbearable to any human companion, but for him it was the sweetest music to his ears. The intoxicating mix of dizziness and adrenalin created a mood of sheer ecstasy that expressed itself through uncontrollable, manic fits of laughter. 'Dash my buttons, Chuckaboo! How I've missed this...'

* * *

Two weeks had passed since Ted Fowler's arrest, and it was still the talk of the town. Mabel Forrester and her friends from the church, in particular, seemed to have forgotten how much they once liked the local shopkeeper.

'I always thought he was a bit strange,' Mabel said as the Thursday night women's fellowship drew to a close.

'Oh, no doubt about it,' agreed Mrs Cooper. 'A bachelor at that age. There was always a question mark hanging over him.'

'We must remain prayerful. Devil-worshippers may still be among us.'

'There is no "maybe" about it. I've seen one of them in the flesh, performing some kind of Satanic ritual in the cemetery. You mark my words, Ted Fowler is part of a ring of them, and who knows how wide the circle runs. All we can do is protect our families. Prayer and vigilance.'

Barney, who had come to drive Mabel home, looked most uncomfortable as they finished their tea and biscuits.

'Well ladies, trust in your local police. The matter is in hand, so you stick to the prayer and my colleagues and I will do the detective work.'

'Hmmm,' said Mrs Cooper. 'Let's just hope you don't have any members on the inside. I mean, that secret society, its claws are deeply embedded throughout the force, from top to bottom.'

'And perfectly legal. There are no bad eggs in our station, my dear. You really mustn't believe what you read in the papers. Police corruption is virtually non-existent.'

'Oh no? Then why haven't you found that fella with the cane? He's part of it, I'm sure. Probably a senior officer.'

'Mrs Cooper, I cannot discuss the details of our work. But you should be reassured enough that we have put an end to the illegal supply of those devil-comics, as you call them.'

'I wouldn't be so sure of that, love,' said Mabel, nervously.

'What do you mean, woman?'

'I'll tell you on the way home. Come on, it's time we got back. Jack will be wanting some supper before bed.'

* * *

Every night for the last two weeks, Jack's new friend had been bringing fresh comics to him in the dead of night, exercising the same climbing skills that had apparently got him inside Ted Fowler's flat, by shimmying up the drainpipe to reach Jack's bedroom window. They had become good friends, even though Jack still barely knew the lad. It had taken a week for him to even find out his friend's name was Varne. It had started off ever so exciting, but his expectations had been going seriously downhill. The new material just wasn't cutting it.

'Look at the date on this one... 1888? No wonder they don't make sense, Varne.'

'That's what makes them so special, Jack. These are originals.'

'Reproductions more like. Is it some kind of loophole in the law — we can have our comics as long as they were published last century? Almost as bad as those attempts to make the Bible more fun.'

'Horror stories never grow old. Give them a chance.'

To Jack's surprise, Varne was holding back tears. He felt awful now.

'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'I'm sorry, I just thought you of all people would understand.'

'They aren't that bad. I could grow to like them I suppose, but I can't sell them. The others have jumped ship, they're all into football superstars now'

'We've got to make this work, Jack.'

'Bring back *Gruesome Tales*, that's the only way.'

'How about if I could prove to you these are genuine first editions?'

'Ha. Next you'll be telling me you have a time machine.'

'It's your turn to visit my home, Jack. Get your shoes on.'

'Now? Are you out of your mind? My parents will be back in five minutes.'

'I thought you weren't scared of them?'

'I'm not, but I wouldn't want to worry them. It's not worth the bother. Mum is paranoid enough as it is, and Dad would go completely over the top when I got back. He'd probably lock me up in one of the police cells to teach me a lesson.'

'I see, so it's okay for me to disappear, just not you?'

'Your parents don't know you've been coming here?'

The sound of a car screeching to a halt was quickly followed by the banging of doors.

'Too late now, they're back early. Dad must have really put his foot down.'

'Jack Forrester. Downstairs. Now!'

'Sounds like he's already going over the top about something,' said Varne.

'Do you hear me, son? Your secret's out, Mum found your printed filth in the bin!'

'You threw them away?' whispered Varne, hissing and spitting like he'd become one of those devils again.

'It doesn't matter now,' said Jack. 'Come on, let's go.'

* * *

The Doctor's maiden voyage in his reconfigured time ship hadn't exactly gone to plan. At first, he feared that there had been a glitch in the rejuvenation process, a slight corruption in his memory banks. He was supposed to have been on Mars to remind himself of just how far away from the truth Captain Marley's monsters were. His alien friends there may have had an oily, lime green hue about them, glistening from the folds of their scaly skin, but they were beautiful, nonetheless. Especially the faces — with their big, doting eyes and chiselled cheekbones. Instead, the ship had been skipping in time along the exact same spot, travelling as far as 1888 and back again. The ship was acting like a stuck record, but try as he might, the Doctor couldn't take the needle off to change it.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the ship could have settled in 1888 — at least it was a more agreeable period in Earth history — but at the final point of materialisation the engines would churn away again and bounce him back to the here and now. A check of the flight records brought the reassurance that it was the ship that had become confused and not him. He should never have been in this time in the first place. He had originally programmed the ship to take him to Victorian London, which made sense given the sensibilities of his new persona. Something was stopping the ship from completing that journey. It was a puzzle he would need to solve before he could set sail again.

The answer had to lie in Ted Fowler's shop and the alien anomaly he had detected there. Time itself was being interfered with, and each rotation was returning the Doctor a day later. It wasn't until the fifteenth attempt that he had finally worked out what had been going on.

'Come on Chuckaboo. There's no more time to lose. A lot can happen in two weeks and who knows what we've missed.'

* * *

Mr and Mrs Forrester were beside themselves with worry. Jack hadn't returned the previous night and a police investigation into his disappearance was already well underway. Barney had been eager to take the lead, but much to his irritation, a unit from up west had been pulled in. According to the superintendent he was in no fit state to be at work, let alone be involved in the search. It was best they both staff at home in case their son returned of his own volition.

At around three in the afternoon, a knock at the door brought a stomach-churning mixture of dread and excitement. Holding Mabel's hand, Barney braced himself for whatever news was about to be delivered.

To Barney's surprise it was the lead detective DI Crawley at the door, together with his smarmy sidekick DS Morrison.

'Have you found him?'

Crawley shook his head.

'School has drawn a complete blank. His friends haven't heard from him.'

'What about the circus man, Cornelius Crocus? A stranger, no family, just happens to turn up two weeks ago wearing period dress. There has to be a connection, look...'

Barney showed Crawley the Penny Dreadfuls his wife had recovered from the bin.

'Well, that is a line of enquiry —'

'What else can it be? Did you read the reports on the sightings of the midget vampire that have been getting the church folk all worked up? Members of the same criminal fraternity, no doubt. I suspect this Crocus is a conman, but he could be in charge of a network of witchcraft and wizardry, using these comics to groom children. You must question Ted Fowler again. Look, I'm not being funny, but I am sure I am far better placed to lead this investigation than you.'

'A man who apparently didn't even know his son was unlawfully engaged in the distribution of said comics.'

'What?'

'His friends confessed,' smiled the DS.

'He has been used, like I said. Stop wasting time here and interrogate Fowler.'

We have already spoken to Mr Fowler. In fact, DS Morrison had a most interesting discussion with him. That's why we are here. There's no easy way to say this, Mr Forrester, but I am arresting you in connection with the disappearance of Jack Forrester, and on suspicion of assaulting Edward Fowler.' No, no. 'This is all wrong!' screamed Mabel, as Barney stood silent in sheer disbelief.

'And, Mrs Forrester,' said Morrison, enjoying every second of this. 'I am arresting you under section eight of the Accessories and Abetters Act 1861.'

* * *

Fowler's convenience store was not only still closed, it had been completely boarded up and was now being guarded by several uniformed police officers.

'Well something's happened, Chuckaboo,' whispered the Doctor, strolling along the opposite side of the road, like a man out of time and place. 'Even for this era, this is an extreme response to the distribution of a few comic nasties.'

One of the officers, spotting the Doctor, touched his neck as if issuing a silent command. The Doctor continued walking, all too aware that he was now being followed by two other policemen. He slipped down a side street and led them on a merry dance up and down various roads and alleys.

Suddenly, he stopped.

'I think that's enough exercise for one day, don't you? Now then, why are you following me?' he said without turning. 'No comment? In that case, maybe you can answer my second question of the day. Where is the police station? You see, I would very much like to speak to whoever in charge of the investigation into the strange happenings at Fowler's Convenience Store. Because strange they most certainly are, isn't that right?'

'You're a fool to come sniffing around,' boomed a rather agitated voice from behind a lamppost. 'Cuff him!'

The Doctor smiled so broadly, his dimples were at their most pronounced. He was in.

* * *

If it wasn't for his father's angry tirade, Jack would never have gone with Varne. The boy seemed friendly enough, but he had been so evasive about his background, coupled with the fact that he still hadn't started school, and Jack was sure there was more to him than met the eye. He suspected he was a runaway, a small-time criminal who probably lived off the streets somewhere, or squatted in an empty building. So, when Varne had led him to Ted's convenience store, Jack's instincts were to return straight home and face the punishment.

He could remember almost word for word the extraordinary journey and tortured himself by reliving the experience, cursing every single moment he should have turned around, beginning with their conversation outside the store.

'You've been living here? I bet Ted doesn't even know, does he? Where have you been hiding? In the roof? In the cellar? Well, listen, I'm done, I'm not breaking in again.'

'Relax, the old man's been staying with his sister, hiding low until he's sold the place. He's not been charged with any crime, but he's too ashamed to show his face around here again.'

'It's so silly, having to give up his home and livelihood because people like my Mum have such bad taste and hate anything American. How did you get away with it before? How come Ted didn't catch you?'

'He came close a couple of times, but just assumed the place was haunted. I never stuck around long enough for him to see me.'

'You surprise me, I mean you sure do love freaking out the churchgoers in the chapel cemetery.'

'Yeah, but they deserve it. He doesn't. He's all right. Come on, Jack. You loved watching me put on a show.'

'It was pretty funny seeing Mrs Cooper's face.'

'Come back to my place now, and I can even fix you up with some clothes of your own. You can join me next time. Let's give her double the scares.'

At that point, Jack should have laughed off the crazy suggestion and left his strange friend to it. But Varne wasn't letting it drop. He was going to do everything to make sure he came inside.

'An outfit and more comics than you could read in a year. Enough for you and every pupil at St Barnabas.'

'The police won't have left any behind. They'll be long gone now. You're having me on.'

'Wanna bet?'

The prospect was tantalising enough to lure him inside, against his better judgement.

Varne had taken him, not to the loft or cellar, but to a spare room in the flat upstairs.

It looked to be a dumping ground for old furniture, excess shop stock and various odds and ends, but just as Jack had suspected, there were no comics.

'So where do you sleep? On the ceiling?'

'I don't. We vampires daren't dream.'

It was obviously a joke, but Varne sounded deadly serious.

'So, about these clothes... '

Varne stepped over a pile of rubbish and disappeared inside a double-doored wardrobe leaning against the back wall.

That had been another missed cue for Jack to do a runner.

'Stop playing games with me, Varne. Come on...'

Several seconds passed until the coat hangers stopped rattling. Jack rolled his eyes and pushed the clothes apart. Varne had vanished. Jack recalled watching the man with the cane performing tricks on his dad. The two newcomers to town had to be related, surely. Part of the same circus act.

'Varne, please stop this now. There's no such thing as Narnia.'

Or maybe there was.

Climbing inside the wardrobe, Jack expected to find a secret door, or a hole in the wall behind. There was a gap, but it was one that defied all logic. A kaleidoscope of multi-coloured, crackling lights formed a circle just large enough to step inside.

'Varne, are you there...?' shouted Jack, his voice shaking with abject terror. 'Varne?'

Jack stumbled backwards, holding onto the clothes to break his fall. But some kind of magnetic force was puffing him feet-first into the mysterious gap. He was almost horizontal, suspended two feet off the ground when he was sucked through the rift at high speed. The doors of the wardrobe slammed shut, leaving no trace of the two boys.

* * *

Goose Common Police Station was situated at the entrance to the local park, adjacent to the public library and town hall. One could be mistaken for thinking this picturesque setting was at the heart of a village, located somewhere out in the sticks. But Goose, as the locals called it, was a well populated suburb on the north-east outskirts of the capital. Thanks to the lack of a tube station and a friendly local bus service, most of the older residents didn't see themselves as Londoners. Goose was a haven, an outpost of traditionalism in an ever changing world. London, like America, was viewed as a threat, although any animosity was offset by the Goosers' pride in the city's landmarks and world standing. For Mrs Cooper and her ilk, this was London as it should be, not the one that was becoming more and more cosmopolitan and less neighbourly with every passing day.

Newcomers were regarded with suspicion and subjected to an unwritten vetting system. Attending the parish church, shopping locally, and staying inoffensively in the shadows while people slowly got used to you, were all points winners, but any expression of difference, whether in the way one dressed or spoke, would be a severe obstacle to gaining acceptance. The Doctor was never going to belong here. Not that he even wanted to.

'An impressionable young man runs away from this fossilised society. I really can't think why.'

Inspector Crawley banged his fist on the interview room table. The man with the cane was being insufferable.

'Jack Forrester is from a good home. Not only can his parents afford sugar in their tea on Sundays, they are some of the lucky few who own both a telephone and a television set. His school records, unsurprisingly, show no indication that he was being disadvantaged.'

'Well, I'm sorry but I can't help you. Not unless you drop this questionable tone. Remember, I came to you…'

Crawley turned to his partner, DS Morrison, and raised his eyebrows.

'Yes, you did, mate,' said Morrison. 'But only because you knew we were on to you.'

'Tell me, are you a family man, Mr Crocus?'

'I am a citizen of the universe. Which makes you two my brothers. But as they say, you can't pick your family.'

'You know what I mean. Do you have a wife and children?' Crawley shouted.

'Not in this life. I fail to see the relevance...'

Crawley, twitching with irritation, scratched his reddening neck.

'Current residence?'

'How about you tell me yours first?'

'Current residence!'

'Here, now. East London, 1888. Mars, 2055. The Dunes of Dothrea, 3088. Gal... This could take a long time...'

'Interview suspended,' shouted Crawley. After the two officers had left the room, the Doctor put his feet up on the table.

'What do you think, Chuckaboo?'

He wafted a hand over the tip of his cane, causing it to illuminate the room with a ray of ultraviolet light, more intense than anything used to treat melancholy. The cane flashed and beeped as the Doctor scanned several sets of fingerprints on the table.

'Most interesting,' he said, examining the most recent prints from Crawley and Morrison.

'I wasn't expecting that. And did you notice how these policemen keep on touching their necks?' In the corridor outside, Crawley and Morrison discussed their next move.

'He's a time waster. Probably just some old English eccentric looking for attention,' said Morrison.

'More than likely. Even so, like Forrester, he's a complication we could do without right now. We can't risk him sniffing around the shop again.'

'What do you suggest?'

'Stick him in the cell with the copper. We've wasted enough time as it is.'

'Shouldn't we at least find out what information he claims to have?'

'Given what both Forrester and Fowler have said about him, he'll be wanting to entertain us with one of his conjuring acts. As if that's going to impress us.'

'We ought to confiscate that cane of his.'

'Nah, throw the prop in with him. With any luck, Forrester will knock the fool senseless with it.'

'So, we are absolutely sure he has nothing to do with the real nature of our investigation?'

'If anything, it's people like him who are helping our cause. He might be human, but he's a great advert for the wisdom of fearing the alien.' Once again, Crawley put a finger to his neck, and, as he continued, his eyes flitted about like a man possessed. 'Misfits like Doctor Crocus sow the seeds for our brighter, guilt-free future. We need the outsiders, especially the loners, to be able to strengthen our walls and protect our identity. The comics are all the boy's doing, and with any luck our runaway will shortly be showing his face again at the shop. He'll soon learn that his actions have been completely counterproductive.'

Morrison bowed with a deference that belied his haughty persona.

'Oh yes, sir. Order will be restored.'

Crawley patted him on the back. 'That's the ticket, my man. You can't change the times, even if you had the gift of time-travel, and thank heavens for that.'

* * *

'Look around you if you don't believe me. It's the truth.'

It was hard to argue against the overwhelming evidence Varne had been presenting him with, but, even so, Jack was determined to find another explanation for why he appeared to have travelled back in time. It was as if he was standing inside a page of a pop-up history book. The sights, sounds and smells of a past so very immediate, yet at the same time completely alien, were almost impossible to process.

'We are still in Goose Common. And that is the same house that Ted Fowler will one day set up shop in. But this is my time, not yours. 1888. A vintage year.'

'And Ted's shop is an orphanage,' said Jack, recalling the Home for Misfortunates plaque on the side of the historic building, that used to spook him when he'd first learnt to read.

'I've lived there since I was found abandoned in a basket on the Thames. They say I was just a few hours old.'

'So when did you discover the wardrobe was a time corridor?'

'I was hiding from the nuns. I'd stolen a loaf of bread and six slices of cold meat to treat myself on my eleventh birthday, and when they'd found out It was me, I knew I'd be on the sore end of forty lashes. I got pulled through the portal, just like you did today. Six months ago, or thereabouts.'

'And ended up in my time?'

'Yeah. It's just a two-way link between your time and mine. I don't understand it — who could? — but it has become my place of escape. Without it, I'd have been dead by now.'

'The nuns hit you that hard?'

'I'd have jumped off London Bridge. This is no life. Until I'd stumbled across that miracle, it was the tales of the Devils of Dartmoor, of Varney the Vampire and the Witch of Wanderlust that made life just about bearable. These Penny Bloods, and your comics, aren't just a bit of fun and nonsense. They are far more important than that. They shape how we see the world, especially the people that others would rather spit on, or see hung, dried and quartered, just for being different.'

'But the creatures in the comics, they are mostly evil. That's why they are so fun to read.'

'Misunderstood. Not evil. The best stories make them the heroes. I learnt that if vampires, witches and demons could turn the tables on their accusers, then so could I. I could be a hero. By helping you fight against the people who want to ban your favourite stories, it feels like I'm being just that. If I can't be a hero in my own world, then maybe I can in yours.'

Varne's story struck such a chord with Jack that now he wanted to believe.

'But what makes you so special? Surely the nuns would have found it, at least? How come you're the only one?'

'Maybe I'm not.'

'The man with the cane...'

'I mean, I don't have a clue how or why, or even who he is, but it's possible. I wanted to show my friends, but I couldn't risk one of the nuns finding out. They would have had the thing destroyed for being of the Devil. But I also worried that if it only worked for me, I'd be teased something rotten. God knows what the nuns would do if they ever decided it was me and not the wardrobe that was possessed.'

'I'm almost convinced. You don't sound like a Victorian, though.'

'How would you know? Never trust the history books. Besides, how people speak in real life doesn't always match how they speak on a page. Come on…'

'I should be getting back home...' said Jack.

'No point leaving empty-handed — let's get ourselves some Penny Bloods. And maybe, this time, you'll actually read them?'

Expecting to pick some copies up from one of the newsstands on the cobbled streets, Jack was surprised when Varne walked straight past them all and headed instead for the parish church. In contrast to the rest of the town, St Barnabas' was hardly any different from how Jack knew it. The graveyard was less crowded and far better kept, but the church itself was like a fixed point in time, a monument that defied the ageing process.

'What are you doing here, boys?'

Jack stifled a scream at the sight of the toothless gardener waving his rake and limping towards them.

'Relax,' laughed Varne. 'It's only Old Mort, he's all right.'

'It's not just that, it's the thought of talking to anyone here. It's like I'm becoming part of something I shouldn't be interfering with.' Jack recalled his mother's 'children should be seen and not heard' motto. Never had it felt more appropriate.

'Aren't you going to introduce me to your new friend, Varne?' said Old Mort, propping the rake up against a tombstone.

'I'll let him speak for himself, mister,' grinned Varne.

Jack cursed under his breathe. 'Jack Forrester,' he said.

'A Forrester, eh? Any relation to Sergeant Morris?'

Jack trembled. He'd seen the old family photos, every Christmas when his father would repeat the story of how he had decided to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, Morris, by joining the police force.

'Son of a distant cousin, aren't you?' said Varne, trying to be helpful.

'Yeah, just visiting for a few days,' added Jack, glaring at Varne for setting into motion a lie that could come back to bite him.

'Hmmm,' said Old Mort. 'So. what's your business here, Varne?'

'It's OK, he won't tell the Sarge. You know why I'm here.'

'Back so soon.? The last hoard was only burnt two days ago.'

'I know, but anything you've got. We're not fussy. Jack's a good little boy, so they'll all be new to him.'

Old Mort grunted before leading them to a potting shed. Inside, hidden underneath a loose wooden floor slat, he took out a small collection of Penny Dreadfuls.

Varne's eyes lit up. 'Oh, this is a good one,' he said, passing Jack a highwayman tale boasting murder, kidnap and debauchery on the cover.

'Whatever you do, don't let the Sarge find them,' said Old Mort, eager to send the boys on their way.

'Why the secrecy? It's not like they've been taken off the shelves... there are even posters of them around the town,' said Jack as they left the church grounds.

'Every time a child commits a crime, the Penny Bloods get blamed,' said Varne. 'We're not so different from you. The vicar is on a moral crusade to get them banned. In the meantime, he encourages parishioners to buy them for him, or raid their children's bedrooms, so that he can carry out public burnings in the church garden. It's become a regular monthly event, there's quite the party atmosphere.'

'Mrs Cooper would love it here, and so would my mum. So, Mort doesn't approve and keeps some aside? Why? What's in it for him?'

'You've seen the fella, he's one of life's have-nots. The kind of man a person would cross the street to avoid passing. The bloods speak for him as much as they do for us.'

'At least he has a job.'

'Yeah, the vicar's idea of charity. It's not as if he gets paid well. Better occupied in the service of the Lord than prowling the streets, or so they say.

* * *

Barney Forrester had been expecting a visit from his solicitor when the cell door opened.

'About time,' he growled, only to be greeted by Morrison escorting the Doctor. 'What is this?'

'Thought you might like some company.'

'Where's my solicitor? He should be here by now.'

Morrison shot him a smarmy glance and, ignoring the question, locked the pair of them in.

Barney banged on the cell door.

'And my boy, any news on my boy? You should all be out there looking for him...'

The Doctor grinned at Barney.

'PC Fisticuffs, I certainly didn't expect to see you here.'

'It's not funny. This is totally against procedure — sharing a cell.'

'Well, General Custard, or whatever his name is, doesn't seem to be the kind of fella who would play by the book. Then again, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?'

'Ted Fowler disrespected my son. If anything, my actions should be called upon in my defence. Instead I'm being framed for my boy's disappearance.'

'Your son is missing?'

Barney sat down and held his head in his hands.

'He ran away from home last night. To my shame, I was about to rain down the fury of the Lord on him because of those wretched comics. If I could turn back time...'

'Last night? And your colleagues out there are already jumping to wild conclusions?'

'All based on circumstantial evidence. Me attacking Ted Fowler, the neighbours reporting a disturbance. I never thought I'd ever say this, and my grandfather would be turning in his grave, but maybe Mrs Cooper is right and there is widespread corruption in the force. I should never have investigated the comic books.'

'You think there's a connection?'

'What else can it be?'

The Doctor sat down next to Barney and put an arm around him.

'How about we go and find out?' he said, with a glint in his eye.

'What are you going to do, Crocus, magic us away?'

'Mr Fisticuffs, I don't usually do magic. But if my suspicions are right, we are dealing here with some very nasty blood-worms. It's time we of under their skin.'

The Doctor pulled out another string of sausages from his hat and threaded them along the edge of the door. He tapped his cane four times. The lightbulb handle began to glow, more intensely than ever.

'Oh, dash my buttons, you're on fire today, Chuckaboo!'

As if on cue, the cane had effectively become a flaming torch.

The Doctor set light to the sausages.

'Stand back, man!' he shouted with glee.

'I can't condone this,' said Barney, dumbstruck, as the door was completely blown off.

The Doctor waved his cane around in front of him, sending plumes of black smoke into the station.

'Come on man, there's no time to lose.'

'Wait,' said Barney. 'My wife is in the next cell. I'm not leaving her.'

Frantically, Barney searched the unmanned custody suite for the keys.

The Doctor sighed. Sometimes it was a blessing not having anyone else to care about. 'If you make it out of here, don't go home. Meet me at the convenience store. I will find your son, and that's a promise.'

* * *

Crawley and Morrison had left the station unattended in order to personally conduct the search of the Forrester residence. Meanwhile, every other police officer on duty in Goose was keeping watch in and around Ted's shop.

'He was here, all right,' said Morrison.

On Jack's desk were two glasses, and between them a *Devils of Dartmoor* Penny Dreadful.

Crawley closed the bedroom window and nodded, holding up a knot of jet-black hair he'd found caught in a drainpipe clip.

'No doubt about it. So, the two disappearances are connected, just as we thought. Now, what was our target doing with the fair-haired English boy?'

'He's messing with history.'

'We know that, Morrison. For goodness sake.'

'No sir, I mean look at the comic. It's not from America, like the ones we found in the target's hideout. In fact, it doesn't even belong to this time.'

'It's genuine and not a modern reproduction?'

'Absolutely. The brand of paper, the ink... it might look new, but this publication dates from 1888. Somehow, our Varne has been travelling between different periods in Earth history.'

'This doesn't make any sense. His hideout has been secured... unless...'

The two undercover agents came to the same realisation.

'The slippery swine!' said Morrison, almost impressed by the audacity of the boy.

'To the store, now. And order the guards to search the place again, brick by brick and floorboard by floorboard.'

* * *

The Doctor was remonstrating with the officer guarding the entrance to Ted's convenience store.

'I'm here to help with the investigation,' he said.

'Our orders are unchanged. Nobody is to be allowed inside. So hop off.'

'Orders from who, exactly?'

'Inspector Crawley.

'And how did you receive those orders, might I ask?'

'I… I…'

The confused officer rubbed his neck.

'Twitchy muscle, officer? I'm a Doctor, I can help with that...'

As the Doctor leaned over to examine the pulsating neck, the policeman kneed him in the groin.

'What is it with the police and brutality?' said the Doctor, bent double and leaning on his cane.

The officer touched his neck again and was quickly joined by three of his colleagues.

'Cuff him while we await further instructions.'

In one deft movement, the Doctor flicked the cane over his head. It brushed against the officer's neck and landed behind him.

'New instructions,' said the Doctor as the officer clawed the side of his neck.

Speaking so quickly that he sounded like he was talking in an alien tongue, the Doctor issued a string of nonsensical instructions. He smiled, almost apologetically as every single officer on the scene fell to the floor clutching their necks. 'Now,' he said. 'Hop off.'

In unison, the policemen in and around Ted's convenience store stood up and hopped away.

Catching his flying cane en route, the Doctor made his way inside the shop. 'Good work, Chuckaboo. Good work.'

* * *

The Doctor stood in front of the open wardrobe, mesmerised by the circle of coloured lights.

'Beautiful,' he said. 'And I am so tempted... but no shortcuts allowed. I'm afraid you simply cannot be here. I have to break the cycle, you see. I have to be free. I'm sorry.'

He pointed his cane at the rift in time and closed his eyes as the anomaly was sealed.

Searching through what was now, once again, an ordinary wardrobe, the Doctor recovered a tiny metallic ring.

He was about to return to his ship when a breathless Barney and Mabel entered the room, holding hands.

'What happened to my workmates?' said Barney. 'We passed them outside, hopping around aimlessly like rabbits and completely ignoring us.'

'Is he here?' said Mabel. The Doctor looked at them blankly.

'Our Jack? Has he been here all along?'

'I'm sorry for your loss,' said the Doctor, head down. He doffed his hat as a distraught Mabel fell to the floor.

'No, no,' said Barney. 'You can't leave us hanging like this, Crocus...' shouted Barney. 'You promised...'

With Barney torn between comforting his wife and apprehending the Doctor, the time-traveller seized the opportunity to make his exit.

* * *

'Why can't I get through to them?' shouted Crawley as he ran with Morrison to the shop.

'Did you hear that?' said Morrison. 'Interference in the signal. Someone has been issuing counter-orders.'

'You!' exclaimed Crawley as the Doctor ran straight into them.

'Looking for this?' he said, holding up the ring.

'How did you...'

'I don't know why you are meddling with history. But it is over.'

'You're a time agent...' said Crawley. 'How did I miss it?'

'I'm nobody's agent. I am the Apostle of the Universe. And you?'

'You've got this all wrong. We are not the criminals here.'

'Oh no?'

'We are from the 31st century...'

'I gathered as much. Your fingerprints show all the hallmarks of your species' evolved form, circa 3001.'

'We are hunting an escaped convict. He is the true source of the time breaches that have been plaguing Goose Common. I demand you hand over the ring.'

The Doctor smiled as a familiar figure approached, flanked by two, now fully deprogrammed, policemen. 'Barney!' he exclaimed. 'Arrest these men for impersonating police officers.' Barney couldn't believe the arrogance of the man for assuming he would simply do as he was told. Crocus didn't even check for a reaction. Instead he was more interested in his fob-watch. 'Dash my buttons, is that the time? Toodle-loo!'

'Oh no you don't,' said Barney. 'I'm arresting all three of you. And one of you is going to take me to my son, so help me God.'

* * *

'They found me,' said Varne, sounding utterly dejected as he slumped on the bed in the guest room of the Victorian orphanage.

'This can't be happening,' shouted Jack, bashing the back of the 1888 wardrobe. 'Work, damn you, work!'

'It's no use. We are trapped here.'

'What do you mean, we? It's okay for you, this is your world.'

'You think?'

The sound of a thousand violent winds hit them from behind as, of all things, a modern police box materialised inside the room.

Barney Forrester stepped outside the booth, dazed and confused at first, but overcome with emotion upon seeing Jack.

'Dad?'

'It's time to come home, son.'

The Doctor joined them, delighted that he was now, once again, free to travel across time and space. He looked admiringly at the unscripted new appearance of his TARDIS.

'When a police officer asks for help, I suppose this makes sense. Sort of. My TARDIS must still be confused by the temporal displacements.'

'The man with the cane?' said Varne.

'So what do you think, Barney? A bag of mystery or just another blood-worm?' said the Doctor, eying up Varne.

The Doctor pointed the cane at Varne, bathing him in ultraviolet light. The boy writhed and wriggled, his face contorting as if he was in intense pain.

'Leave him alone,' said Jack. 'He's just a boy like me.'

Varne huddled himself into a ball, hiding his face even after the light had diminished.

'It's all right, my friend,' said the Doctor, kneeling beside him. 'I'm no more human than you are and I never judge a sausage by its skin.'

Varne slowly lowered his hands to reveal his true appearance.

Barney recoiled and Jack gasped.

Varne's skin had turned grass-green, and his eyes were no longer filled with a single iris and pupil. Instead a maze of tiny red and yellow dots looked up at them.

'Of course!' said the Doctor. 'You're a Varnian from the 31st century. What on earth are you doing here?'

'Trying to change my world,' confessed Varne. 'Where I'm from, we are treated as animals. The lucky ones are locked in cages to be laughed at by curious humans. The rest are experimented on, harvested to be turned into cosmetics and coats. Some of us escaped in our confiscated time ships, and our mission is to change the course of history, to sow the seeds of understanding that will create a planet of equals.'

'You're an alien?' said Jack.

'I'm a hero. Like the demons, devils, witches and wizards of your comics.'

'Here,' said the Doctor, passing Varne the ring.

'I believe this belongs to you.'

'It's the time hopper unit from my ship,' explained Varne. 'After I landed in the grounds of St Barnabas', I took it out to throw the humans off the scent. I knew they'd be coming for me.'

'And you used it to set up a fixed temporal gateway from Ted's convenience store to this orphanage,' said the Doctor, impressed.

'But why go to all that trouble? Why didn't you just tell me you were from the future?' said Jack.

'Would you have accepted me as I am?' asked Varne.

Jack hesitated. 'Small steps,' said Varne. 'One day, your people will be ready. So long as you keep imagining the possibilities and stop being so afraid of the unknown.'

* * *

That night at the Forrester's home, the Doctor put on a parting show for the family. Just a few tricks, while he enjoyed the hospitality of the grateful family. Varne was there too, feeling welcomed and loved. Even Mabel, though nervous and worried about what Mrs Cooper and her cohort would say if they ever found out, had treated him with nothing but kindness. This was how it should be, he thought, humans and Varnians breaking break together.

The Doctor checked his fob-watch. 'Time to go. It has been a pleasure.'

'Come on Crocus, at least stay for the final part of *Captain Marley*.'

The Doctor pulled a face. 'Thanks, but no thanks. I see enough aliens in real life.'

'Can I watch it, Dad? Please?' asked Jack.

Barney glanced at Mabel, who nodded in quiet assent.

'I suppose I should be going too,' said Varne, spinning the ring around his little finger.

'No, You mustn't, Varne,' said Jack.

'You can't hide me here forever. Let's face it I don't belong and never will.'

'Never say never,' said Jack, waving one of the Penny Dreadfuls.

'Oh, Jack,' said Mabel, disapprovingly.

'Mabel,' said Barney. 'I owe Ted Fowler an apology, and after today's events, I see no reason why we should be so frightened by the fantastic. It doesn't matter where the comics come from, who are we to stop them?'

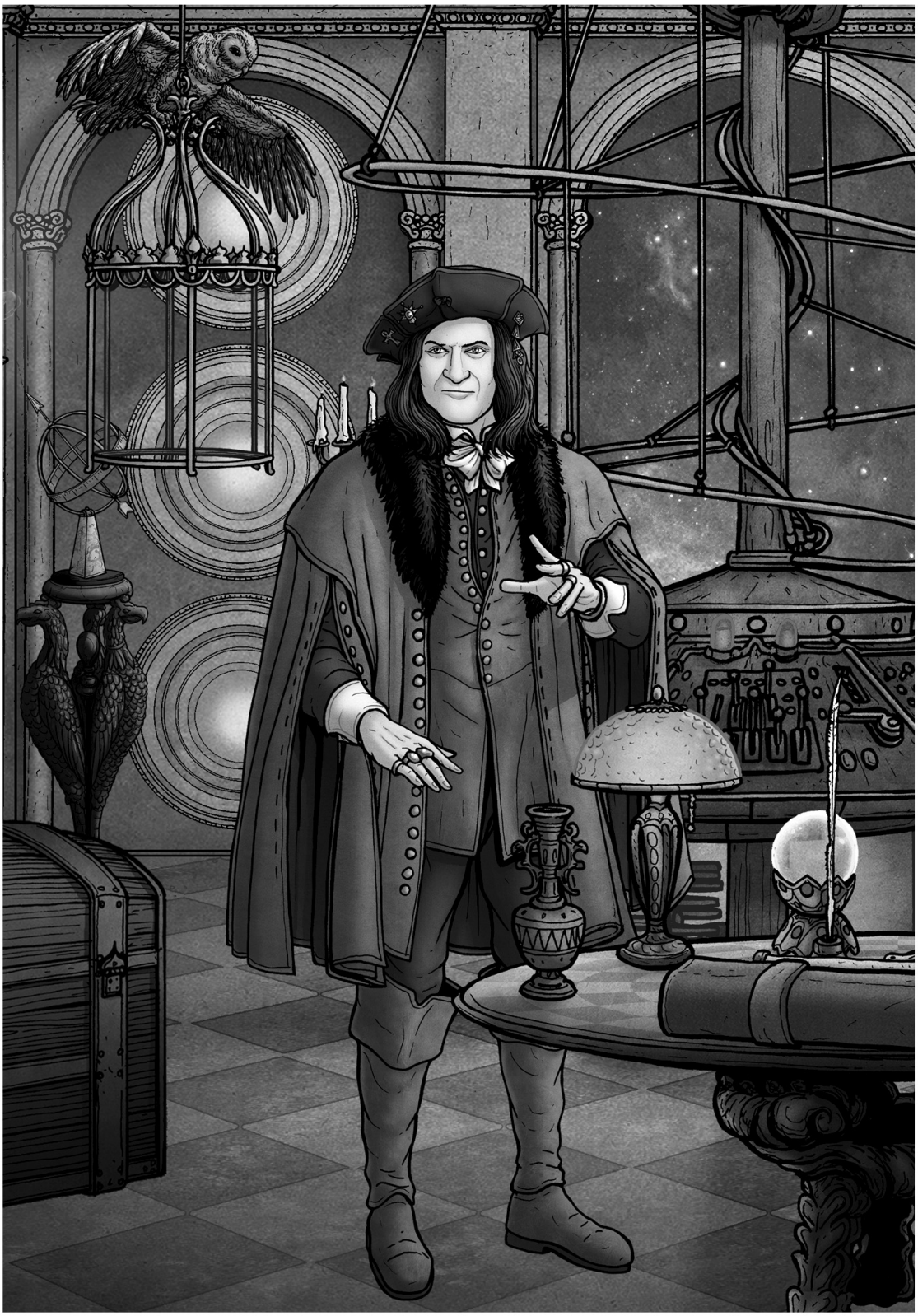
'Bravo, good sir, bravo! And no more Mr Fisticuffs, eh?' said the Doctor. 'Now, young Varne. I have a proposition for you. You can return the ring to your ship and see what fate awaits you back home — though I somehow doubt it will be a good one, not with those two human investigators stranded here. There's bound to be repercussions. Or... we can stow your ship inside mine and travel together. For as long as you want...'

The Doctor shook his hat, sending a shower of loose sausages across the room.

'...with no strings attached.'

THE DOCTORS

THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the DR. WHO that married a woman named Zodin. He was proficent in the arts of jai alai and Tythonian sumo wrestling.



THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the DR. WHO that sometimes had a talking owl as a companion. He had a formidable knowledge of the occult and Tiffany lamps.

THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the first DR. WHO to witness the destruction of Atlantis, meet the Loch Ness Monster and become human and fall in love with Joan Redfern.

THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the DR. WHO that was a master of swords, cards and macramé. He met a premature end in a duel with the Witch of the White House.

THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the DR. WHO that sought truth most never find. With 3-D spectacles, he sought within, outside, behind the lattitude of human minds... and also in Harry Nilsson's London apartment.

THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the DR. WHO that had a psychic beard and sometimes masqueraded as an Earth Adjudicator. We're fairly sure he was a man back then, but it was a long time ago.

THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the DR. WHO that accidentally created the Krotons, Sontarans, Autons, Drashigs and Kroll. That'll teach him to meddle with time.

THE CHANGING FACE OF DR. WHO
This illustration portrays the DR. WHO that was a prolific inventor. He created the Time Path Detector, the sonic shoehorn and the most popular Cloister Bell ringtone.

THE AUTHORS

Aditya Bidikar

Aditya Bidikar works as a comic-book letterer and writes in his spare time. He has previously written short stories for Obverse's *Faction Paradox* and *Iris Wildthyme* lines. He lives in India surrounded by comics and a single cat.

Simon Bucher-Jones

Simon Bucher-Jones can remember vaguely many previous 'faces': schoolboy, English Lit student, trainee teacher (don't ask), civil servant, husband, father, but for most of them he's been writing. Eventually he hopes to be good at it, and the story in this collection is, as always, the best he can do for now. He's written other fiction and non-fiction for Obverse, tie-in *Doctor Who* novels (with and without co-writers) for Virgin and the BBC, and self-publishes anything too weird for professional publishers to consider... and poetry. He's proud to be able to support charities doing good works through writing. This year he has contributed to *Doctor Who: Journey into Time*, *The Curse of Fanfic*, and seen into print the novella *Professor Howe and the Furious Foam*. He's also drawing a very peculiar graphic novel version of the play *The King in Yellow*, now half way through in only five years!

Kara Dennison

Kara Dennison is the author of several short stories and books, including *Vanishing Tales of the City* and *The Black Archive #21: Heaven Sent* (both from Obverse Books) and the award-winning *Son of the Wolf* (18th Wall). She is also the co-creator of *Owl's Flower* with illustrator Ginger Hoesly, and co-founder of Altrix Books with Paul Driscoll. When not writing sci-fi and fantasy, Kara is reviewing it as *Sci Fi Magazine's* book reviewer, as well as working as a staff writer for both *Crunchyroll* and *Otaku USA*.

Paul Driscoll

Paul Driscoll is a writer, editor and publisher based in Leigh, Greater Manchester. He has been a *Doctor Who* fan ever since his parents took him to see the stage play *The Seven Keys to Doomsday*. He is the co-founder of Altrix Books, whose publications include his novel The *Chronosmith Chronicles: After Vincent* and the *Doctor Who* essay collection *Army of Ghosts*. Having written two books for Obverse Books' *Black Archive* range, in 2020 he joined the editorial team. Paul's work has also featured in various charity anthologies including *You on Target* (Watching Books), *Whoblique Strategies* (Chinbeard), *The Unofficial 1987 Doctor Who Annual* (Terraqueous Distributors), and *The Curse of Fanfic* (Obverse Books).

Jay Eales

Jay Eales edited *Faction Paradox: Burning With Optimism's Flames* for Obverse Books and has contributed stories to their *Iris Wildthyme, City of the Saved, Señor 105* and *Faction Paradox* ranges. He also shares the love with other publishers when they let him, including Image Comics and Constable & Robinson. He writes, edits, designs, letters, publishes and teaches comics and has the long-arm stapler scars to prove it. In a former life, he edited the Doctor Who charity fanthologies *Perfect Timing 2* (with Helen Fayle), *Walking in Eternity* and

Shelf Life (with Adrian Middleton & David McIntee). He was News Features Editor for the award-winning *Borderline* magazine. A British Fantasy Award runner-up two years running, he lives with a double Eisner nominated writer. Together, they fight crime and publish comics under their Factor Fiction imprint. Stalk him at www.factorfictionpress.co.uk.

Andrew Hickey

Andrew Hickey is a writer, critic, podcaster, and perennially third-placed political candidate. For Obverse Books, he wrote the *Faction Paradox* novel *Head of State*, the *Black Archive* entry on *The Mind Robber* and the *Silver Archive* on *The Strange World of Gurney Slade*, and has contributed to *The Book of the Enemy*, *Tales of the Great Detectives*, and several now-out-of-print charity publications. He has also written non-fiction on *Doctor Who*, superhero comics, and 1960s pop music, and fiction including the *Sarah Turner Mysteries* series of detective novels. His podcast *A History of Rock Music in 500 Songs* just passed its hundredth episode and only just reached the Beatles, suggesting he underestimated the task he was setting himself when he gave it a title. He lives in Manchester with a very tolerant spouse and a less tolerant Jack Russell.

Lance Parkin

Lance Parkin is the author of eight Doctor Who novels, including *Cold Fusion*, the only licensed fiction featuring a Morbius Doctor. He has also contributed to the *Faction Paradox*, *Bernice Summerfield* and *Time Hunter* book series, and various Big Finish audio ranges. Outside the *Doctor Who* universe he has written *Emmerdale* tie-in novels, a guide to Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* books, and biographies of Alan Moore and Gene Rodenberry.

Philip Purser-Hallard

Philip Purser-Hallard is the author of two Sherlock Holmes novels, *The Vanishing Man* and *The Spider's Web*, and a trilogy of urban fantasy political thrillers, *The Pendragon Protocol, The Locksley Exploit* and *Trojans*. He has written two licensed *Doctor Who* short stories and multiple spinoff works, including the *Faction Paradox* novel *Of the City of the Saved* and the *Time Hunter* novella *Peculiar Lives*. He has edited *Iris Wildthyme of Mars* and the *City of the Saved* anthologies for Obverse. He is the founding editor of the *Black Archive* series of critical monographs about individual *Doctor Who* stories, and has written books on *Battlefield, Human Nature / The Family of Blood* (with Naomi Jacobs), *Dark Water / Death in Heaven and The Haunting of Villa Diodati* (coming in 2021). He lives in Bristol with his wife, son and a brace of cats, and is constantly either writing, editing or playing board games.

Paul Hanley (illustrator)

Paul Hanley is the creator and writer of the comic series *The Unthinkables*, from Unlikely Heroes Studios, and co-creator of *Miss Medusa's Montrous Menagerie*, coming in 2021. He's contributed art to a number of licensed properties, including *Doctor Who*, *Judge Dredd, Firefly* and *Godzilla*. He's also Official Portrait Artist to Ms Iris Wildthyme. You can buy his work at www.uhstudios.com.

AND FINALLY...

If you've enjoyed this book, you might be interested in *The Timeless Doctors* (http://babelcolour.com/timeless-doctors/), a project to make a *Doctor Who* fan film featuring multiple Doctors, including the surviving Morbius Doctors Philip Hinchcliffe, Graeme Harper and George Gallaccio.

(Obverse Books and the *Forgotten Lives* team aren't affiliated with *The Timeless Doctors* in any way, and it doesn't have any charitable aims that we mow of. We just think it's cool.)

A PERSON IS THE SUM OF THEIR MEMORIES. A TIME LORD EVEN MORE SO.

BUT SOME PEOPLE LIVE SO LONG THAT THERE IS NO LONGER ROOM FOR ALL THE MEMORIES; THEY FIND THEMSELVES DIMINISHED, WHITTLED AWAY PIECE BY PIECE…

FOR MANY YEARS, DOCTOR WHO HAS IMPLIED THAT WILLIAM HARTNELL PLAYED THE DOCTOR'S FIRST INCARNATION — BUT IN THE BRAIN OF MORBIUS, WE WERE GIVEN GLIMPSES OF EIGHT STERN-FACED MEN IN ASSORTED HISTORICAL COSTUMES — DOCTORS BEFORE THE ONE WE KNOW AS THE FIRST.

WHAT WERE THEY LIKE, THESE FORGOTTEN DOCTORS? WHAT WORLDS DID THEY VISIT, AND WHAT ADVENTURES DID THEY HAVE THERE? WHO WERE THEIR COMPANIONS, AND WHO WERE THEIR ENEMIES?

AND PERHAPS JUST AS INTERESTING — WHAT SORT OF STORIES WOULD THIS FORGOTTEN PREHISTORY OF DOCTOR WHO HAVE TOLD?